



A *Cheyenne*  
CHRISTMAS  
HOMECOMING

*Caroline Lee*  
Bestselling Author



The  
Sweet  
Cheyenne  
Quartet  
Book 4



Sometimes...  
you can go  
home again.



*A Cheyenne Christmas*  
**HOMECOMING**

*Caroline Lee* 

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Thank you for loving the  
Barkers and Murrays  
as much as I do.*

*And for my Facebook fans,  
who have supported me from the beginning.  
You know who you are.*



## CHAPTER ONE



*March 5, 1880*

*Dearest Nathaniel,*

*Thank you for understanding, or at least pretending to understand, why I had to leave.*

*Of everyone there, of everyone in Cheyenne, you are the one I will worry about the most. Annie has been dependent on me for so long, but I know that she has settled in with the family and with her horses, and will do wonderfully. Besides, now that I have taught you her sign 'language', I know I am leaving her with another champion. You have always been so kind to her. And I will miss Serena and Molly and Ash, and Peter and especially baby Noah... but I think I will miss you most of all.*

*You have been my oldest friend, Nate, and I care deeply for you. I also know that you will happily spend the rest of your life on your ranch. You don't even like to venture into Cheyenne! But I was raised in the city, Nate, and even Cheyenne cannot compare to the Chicago I remember. I love the Wyoming sky, and the fresh air, and the lovely little black-eyed susans... but I know that I will not reach my potential there. I need to go east again, to see what I can become.*

*I am not sure if even you, you who I have spoken to at length about my dreams and aspirations, understand that, or if you are only pretending to for my sake. But my world is a world of books and letters and words, and St. Louis has the most beautiful library, Nate! Here I can revel in the things that I love, the things that I couldn't have in Wyoming. I flatter myself to think that my*

leaving was hard for you to bear, but please be happy for me. Here, I can make something of myself. I can change my future, and make a lasting impression on the world.

I would point out that if our positions were reversed, if I were a man leaving to seek my fortune and you were a woman left behind, then there would be no concern at all. But since I am a woman, I am made to feel guilty about leaving to follow my dreams, instead of staying on the ranch and making a life with the people I love. Oh, I do not say that you have made me feel guilty, at least on purpose. Even Molly has been very supportive, and Serena is, I believe, supremely jealous of my adventure. But I saw your hurt, and I understood it, and that made me feel guilty. No, do not apologize, I do not tell you these things to return the guilt. I merely want to point out that I feel guilty in following my dreams, and that I should not.

You know I believe that women are equal to men, and should have the same rights and privileges. Why, then, is it so hard for me to think of leaving you and the ranch? Why is it so hard to make the decision to become who I wish to become? If I am to survive—nay, thrive!—in this city, I am going to have to start thinking like a man, I suppose. Or perhaps, thinking like a man should think, at least. Oh, I don't know! I want to thrive because of who I am, not who I pretend to be.

I am not explaining myself very well, am I, Nate? Instead, I will change the subject. I know that you will have read my letter to Molly and Annie, and know of my trip. But I will tell you more anyhow. The train was... magnificent. I cannot help but feel that man (and woman!) was not meant to travel at such speeds. Of course, I rode the train so many years ago, on our way from Chicago. Do you remember that day? It was the first time I saw you, there in the station. You were standing beside Ash, and I thought you were a servant. But I could not take my eyes off of you, because you were so darkly striking even then. You were the first Indian I had ever seen, and I made a fool of myself that day, didn't I? I did not believe you were Ash's brother,



but you two soon taught me that love and family bonds are deeper than blood.

But I was telling you about the train! It was beautiful, upholstered in green with dark wood paneling. I did not have a private room, of course, but I preferred the freedom of the car, to be able to meet new people and hear their stories. There were such interesting, lovely people on board! I remembered your warning, and stayed clear of the unsavory types. I met a young couple with a baby from Salt Lake, on their way to visit her family in St. Louis. And two spinster ladies who reminded me of Serena's aunts, who kept me smiling with their witty remarks about current events. There was even a businessman and his wife, traveling all the way to Boston! I enjoyed their company immensely, and I believe that I learned something from every person I met. To me, the joy of meeting new people is learning their stories and getting new ideas.

Throughout the trip, I thought of you often. I wondered what you would think of a particular person, or a certain view. Of course, the history of the machine was not lost on me, either. Knowing that we were traveling over rails laid and watered by the sweat and blood of men—boys!—like you made it seem more personal. I can only imagine what it must have been like for you, as young as you were, to toil across the emptiness of the plains, building the rails I was now lucky enough to whizz over. Hearing your stories, I have always been angry for you. But now, I believe that good has come from your struggle and pain. The railroad was terrifying and wonderful, yes, but it is amazing to be able to travel between territories so easily.

I have arrived safely in my lodgings here in St. Louis, and have met with the 'Principal' of the High School. I believe that I impressed him, despite the fact that I have lived so far from civilization, and have not attended college. Mr. Morgan believes that with my background in deaf education, I will be a fine choice to teach the first-years the basics of Randall's elocution, and introduce them to the rhetoric of the English language. I am optimistic about my chances here.

*I will tell you more about this astonishing city in the next letter, Nate. I have seen so much, and met so many amazing people, that I cannot fit it all into one letter. Of course, you may already know all about the wonders of St. Louis from your brother, but in all the years I have known Ash, he has not spoken of the city of his birth to me. So I will write again next week, I promise. If you have forgiven me for leaving, and can stand to write to me, you can reach me at this address.*

*Thank you for letting me go, Nate. Not that, as a strong woman, I needed you to release me... but I needed you to be comfortable with my leaving, or I would never be able to overcome my guilt. Thank you for at least pretending to be comfortable, so I that could follow my dreams.*

*I miss you, and your comforting presence in my life, already. Please do not hold a grudge for too long, Nate. I don't know if I could stand to not hear from you. Please write soon.*

*My deepest affection,  
Wendy*



November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1883

The shaft of light piercing the hole in the curtains tried to drill directly into his skull. With a groan, Nate Barker pulled a pillow over his head, moving carefully so as to not jostle anything. *What* had he been drinking last night? He must have finished a bottle of whiskey by himself, which was stupid.

Luckily, he didn't have to guess where he was. The satiny sheets and faint scent of roses told him he was in Eve's room. He groaned again. How'd he end up in Eve's room, if he couldn't remember anything from the night before? Usually an evening with her was an evening worth remembering. An *expensive* evening worth remembering.

But he couldn't recall Eve's... *company*. He'd come into

Cheyenne to escort Annie back home tomorrow for the holiday, and figured he could stay at The Eden for the night, instead of with the Carderocks. But when he'd got to the saloon, whiskey sounded better than dinner, and the more whiskey he had, the less interested he was in Eve or one of her girls. He would have figured he'd be out on his ass in the alley mud this morning, instead of lying on a satiny cloud. Not that he was complaining; there were a hell of a lot worse places to wallow in misery with a pounding hangover.

Eve liked the finer things in life... and for what she charged, she could afford them. The mattress was thick and fluffy, and a dozen ducks must have gone to stuff each pillow. The sheets were slick and soft, and always reminded Nate of a lover's kiss. He definitely wasn't wearing anything under those sheets, but he still couldn't recall how he'd turned up nude in Eve's bed.

From under his pile of pillows and the thick comforter, Nate heard the door open, and then close behind someone. Footsteps crossed to the bed, and he knew it was Eve, from her confident stride and her rosewater scent. Then, mercifully, the shaft of light was blocked out when she sat on the bed. He rolled slightly into the hollow she created, and he groaned for a third time.

"I've never seen you drink that much, little savage." Her husky voice could make a man forget most of his cares. She lifted the pillow off of his face, and he felt her soft fingers brush a lock of his hair off his forehead. "I didn't feel like any company anyhow, and you looked like you needed to find a bed before Jose opened another bottle for you."

So she put him in her own bed for the night, which meant she couldn't share it with someone else. He licked his lips, and managed to croak out a whispered "Thank you." Cracking his eyes, he saw her smile, and *Lord*, that woman could smile.

Her eyes softened, and she traced the curve of his cheek with one soft finger. "What are friends for?" He didn't have any response to that, and luckily, she didn't seem to expect one. Instead, she sashayed to the window to block out the light, and Nate would have to be blind to miss the curve of her rear end under her robe. As she stuffed pillows behind his back to prop him up, he contemplated the fact that she wasn't wearing much under that silk.

But sitting up now, the headache was worse. "I'm sorry, Eve. I shouldn't have..."

"Shush, honey." She'd crossed to a small table, and returned with a tray piled high with savory potatoes, ham, and biscuits. Nate felt his stomach heave at the smell.

She must have seen him pale, because she just smiled again and set the tray beside him. Pouring him a tall glass of water, she handed

it to him and said, "I know you don't feel like eating, sugar, but you haven't had anything in that stomach of yours for a while. I held you while you emptied the whiskey out, and stripped you and put you to bed, too." Nate closed his eyes in embarrassment, and she noticed. "No need to be shy, honey. You know I've got a lot of experience with men and too much whiskey. And so you listen to me when I say you gotta eat something. Water and food, that's what's best for you, sugar."

Nate had always liked the way she'd talked to him. Part lover, part mother. Like she could teach him everything he needed to know... And truthfully, she had. He knew that she talked to all of her men like that, but he still liked it. Liked her. He grabbed her hand as she reached for the tray, and brought it to his lips. "Thank you, Eve."

Was that a blush? The woman was almost two decades his senior, and had spent who knows how many of those years as a whore, and she was blushing. But Nate liked her enough to not mention her embarrassment. After all, what are friends for?

She pulled her hand away with a mock glare, and turned to the tray again. Piling a plate high with meat and biscuits, she said, "For that, honey, I'm going to sit right here until you finish eating all of this." Nate grimaced, but tried to hide it. He wasn't successful, because her smile was triumphant when she presented him the plate. "Eat up, my little savage."

Eve was the only person who still called him that. Over the years, he'd pounded so many of Cheyenne's men for mocking his Indian blood that no one mentioned it anymore. To his face, at least. Even his family tip-toed around the subject, but he knew that was because they loved him, and didn't want to cause him more pain. But Nate hadn't bothered explaining that the prejudice and hatred he'd sometimes encountered didn't hurt him anymore. Nope, he'd found a whole new reason to be in pain.

Scowling now, he sat forward, not caring that the satin slipped down to reveal his hips and buttocks, and shoveled in a mouthful of ham. Eve smiled again, proudly, and patted his leg like he was a pet who'd done something right. He turned his glare on her.

Eve laughed then; a surprisingly tinkling sound he knew wasn't her real laugh. Her hand didn't lie still on his thigh, either, but stroked up until she was caressing his stomach and chest. "Oh, honey." Her voice sounded almost hungry. "You still don't know very much about women, do you?"

Well, that floored him. Around a mouthful of biscuit—which was almost as good as Molly's—he mumbled "What?"

The look he'd seen in her eyes—part longing, part resigned—disappeared in a blink, and then her smile was back. But Nate didn't

forget that she was a woman who made a living smiling at men, no matter if they were good friends.

"I like you, Nate, and you needed a friend last night." She tweaked his nose. "But you're smart enough to know that you can't get something for nothing. Even from a beautiful woman like me."

He swallowed the biscuit, and one corner of his lips drew up into a rueful grin. "So, beautiful woman, what do you want from me?" He took another bite of the ham, because he *was* feeling a little better now.

She sighed. "Nothing you can give me, honey. You're too sick."

He was about to protest that he could make an effort, having some idea of what she was after. The two of them had spent many hours in this bed, and he'd given as much pleasure as he'd gotten. But she surprised him by placing her hand on his chest, over his heart. "Sick in here." His mouth went dry. He'd been heart-sick for a long time, but thought he'd hidden it well.

She saw that he was going to object, and shook her head. "Don't lie, honey. It's not fair to either of us." So he swallowed his denial. Her brown eyes searched his for a long moment, before he grew uncomfortable and looked back down at the food on his lap. "You're still missing her, aren't you?"

There was no need to ask which "her" Eve meant. For Nate Barker, there had only ever been one "her". There would only ever *be* one "her". But Wendy had cut herself out of his life almost a year and a half ago, and yeah, he still missed her. She was the reason he'd gotten so stinking drunk the night before. She was the reason he did most of the things he did, honestly.

When he didn't answer, Eve sighed. She leaned over and placed one chaste kiss on his cheek. "I'm sorry, honey. I know it still hurts."

Yeah. It did. Wendy had been his best friend since they were both little more than kids. She knew all of his secrets, and had helped him grow into the man he'd become. She'd taught him so much about himself and the world, and he thought she'd loved him. He'd sure as hell loved her, but he'd never told her.

He'd gotten drunk last night to forget Wendy, even for a while. But here was another way to forget. A much more pleasurable way. Moving the half-finished tray of food to one side, Nate cupped one hand behind Eve's head and drew her lips towards his. Their kiss was, as always, comfortable and familiar, and stirred him. The way she pushed the satin sheets away from his skin did even more, and when she dropped her robe and slipped in beside him, he was hard and ready for her.

And he did forget about Wendy, if just for an hour.



Later, his ride home was... quiet. Eve's ministrations had wiped out his headache, and he felt almost human again. A visit to her bed—to any woman's bed, really—always made him feel that way. Content again, for a little while. A little while of feeling satisfied, before his thoughts of Wendy intruded again, and he remembered why he normally felt so empty. Why no woman he ever visited was quite enough to slake his desire. Why it was Wendy's face he saw in his dreams.

Still, he'd been glad he'd stayed with Eve, when he'd gotten to the Carderocks' new house. Sebastian and Serena were so dang in love it was nauseating. He and Annie had shared some amused glances when the couple started doing their lovey-dovey thing. It was good to see them, and catch up on the news from town, but Nate could only stand to be around their happiness for so long.

He'd only stayed with them a few times over the last two years, when Serena had gotten it into her head to introduce him to society and help him meet proper young ladies. He was pretty sure that she assumed that he needed distracting, and did that by parading him around in front of marriageable misses who were either intrigued or appalled by his Indian blood. And every time it happened, Nate was immeasurably grateful when Sebastian would take pity on him and pull him away to discuss investments or business matters.

On top of that, Serena was Wendy's best friend, and the two of them still exchanged letters. Serena always made an effort to update him on what Wendy was doing without realizing that the news was tearing him up inside. From the pitying glances Annie was sending his way, at least *someone* understood his misery.

Her twin aunts were there, and as always did a good job of distracting him from his moping with their gossips and jokes. They had an incredible habit of each being able to finish the other's sentences, and Nate still couldn't tell them apart. Aunt Agnes—or maybe Agatha—had blushed and confided that her sister was stepping out with Cam MacLeod's father. Ian MacLeod was a crusty old grouch, but the news would have been more meaningful to Nate if he'd known which sister was which. So he'd caught Annie's eye, and she'd given him a little nod, and he'd known that she'd tell them the story at home.

Annie was the reason the trip home was so quiet. She rode her own horse, of course, with her carpetbag tied behind her little saddle. Even at fourteen, she was still a teeny little thing, at least to Nate's

eyes. This sister-in-law of his was deaf, and lived with the Carderocks in Cheyenne while she attended Sebastian's school. But the Barker spread wasn't so far from town that she couldn't come home for special occasions. With the Thanksgiving holiday tomorrow, Molly had sent Nate to bring her sister home.

She could talk now, thanks to more than two years of Sebastian's oralist teachings. But Nate normally preferred silence to pratter, and liked that Annie was happy to oblige him. He'd met her when she and Wendy had come to live with them after their sister Molly married his brother, and Nate had learned the girl's sign 'language' soon after. No matter how good of a speaker she became, Nate would always prefer using the silent hand language with her.

Of course, Annie still spoke to the horses, and the bay mare she was riding now was no exception. Soon after she'd arrived in Cheyenne, Ash had discovered that she had a special way with horses, almost as impressive as his own talents. The three of them became a team, with Nate herding and breeding their horses, Annie caring for the babies, and Ash training them. They'd even taken her to the valley west of their land to catch a new batch of mustangs. But after their second spring together, they realized that Annie was doing her own training of the colts, just through the clucks and whistles she used to communicate with them. Ash had to incorporate her sounds into his own training regimen, once the horses got old enough.

So now all of the animals coming out of the Barker spread—and there was a high demand for Barker-trained horses in these parts, which made Nate inordinately proud—understood Annie to some degree. The two animals they were on now were no different, so Nate let the girl take the lead. He liked watching the way she looked at the world around her, all bright-eyed and interested. She could notice the tiniest details, things Nate would have overlooked. As they rode, she pointed out the frost pattern on a patch of frozen mud, and the two hawks, swooping so high above the clouds that they were distant specks.

He smiled at the wonder in her face, and it felt good. Being out on the trail always felt good to him, no matter the weather. Today it wasn't snowing, at least, but the occasional gust of wind made him glad for his thick coat and the blue woolen scarf Molly had made him all those Christmases ago. Thinking of that winter always made him think of Ash's gift. Of all the changes they'd experienced that holiday season, juggling new roles and new family, Ash giving half of the ranch to Nate had been the most incredible. He hadn't expected it, and had been floored when Ash casually mentioned it. But now he had his own house and a significant share in the profits from horse sales. It was more than he could have ever imagined sixteen years before,

trudging along this very road in the middle of a warm Wyoming spring, just trying to get to the only man who'd ever shown him any kindness.

Ash had found him, and made him a brother, and given him a home. Nate had so much to be thankful for, and so much to enjoy. He had a home, and a family who loved him unconditionally, and enough money and freedom to occasionally visit the city and find some fun. He had more than seven-year-old him could have dreamed of, and he should be content.

So then why did Wendy keep pushing into his thoughts? He sighed. *Why* couldn't he forget her and move on with his life? Why did she continue to haunt him, after all this time?

And when was he ever going to be at peace?



## CHAPTER TWO



July 18, 1881

Dear Nate,

*I took your advice, and left the school. Please do not mention to Molly that you were the reason I quit my job, unless it has been discussed already. I would rather she not blame you, or chastise me any further. I know she believes that I was wrong to leave a steady, respectable career as a teacher, and she made it clear to me in her last letter. But as you know, I have not told her of all of the frustrations I told you, and thus she does not understand my exasperation.*

*Additionally, my sister has been a mother for... well, she has had to 'mother' Annie and myself for close to ten years. But with Pete and baby Noah—although as he told me before I left, he is no longer a baby!—she has become a true mother. Molly is good with children. She understands them in a way I do not. Oh, I can work with individual children, because they are, after all, just small humans. But to work with, discipline, an entire class? Especially a class of rowdy twelve-year-olds? No, that is not one of my strengths. Those boys ran circles around me, and on more than one occasion made me cry. I felt that I had to become someone I was not in order to control them, to inspire them. Few of them appreciated my insight into the great writers of the past, or even the present. Few of them cared to enhance their own craft of writing, as I strive to do. Few of them even cared to listen, and I could not force them to pay me any attention, or follow my instructions. To my sister, though, such a thing comes naturally, and she will never understand*

how miserable it made me.

You understood, though, and your letter of the 5<sup>th</sup> was much appreciated. I poured over it, and thought about what you said for almost a week before I approached Principal Morgan with my resignation. I will not be returning for the winter half... and I have not felt so carefree, so light, since I arrived here with high hopes. I feel like I am free to really pursue my dreams, Nate, which was the entire reason I came to St. Louis. Teaching was not my dream; it was just a way to survive, to live, while I wrote. Now that I am free of that yoke of responsibility, I can write to my heart's content!

And yes, I know what you are thinking now. You are shaking your head, with that little rueful smile of yours, and wondering if I have just deserted a well-paying job to become a shiftless, penniless writer. You are asking how I imagine to support myself on the proceeds of a silly romantic novel. But you know that I am not particularly scatterbrained. I have not tendered my resignation from one position without some thought to the future. I have found a new position! And yes, it is a paying position.

I have been hired as a private tutor for a family with a deaf daughter. The Mulligans are a wealthy merchant family with all of the refinements to pass on to dear little Suzanna. And before you roll your eyes again, Nate, she is dear. I do believe that we will get on famously, and I shall be able to teach her a version of the sign 'language' I taught little Annie. If she turns out half as well as my sister, I shall consider her successful.

I shall be moving my lodgings to the Mulligans' house in the next few weeks, but you may write to this address through the end of the term, and I will receive it. And I do hope you will write, Nate. As always, I value your insights and support. I am hopeful that you will approve of my decision to quit the school. I know that it was the correct choice, but I pray that you will agree.

...And, as always, I am confused why your opinion should matter so much. Is it because you are a man, and I am no more emotionally and

intellectually evolved than any of my sisters who require a man's approval of each action? Or is it because you continue to remain my friend, and I trust you to have my best interests at heart? You know the secrets and goals that I have not shared with anyone else and you have not given me bad advice yet. So please, dear Nate, tell me I have made the right decision.

And, since I have already begged you to respond, I will share my biggest news, pertaining to my manuscript I mentioned earlier. Ready? Is anyone looking over your shoulder, dear friend? This is news for your eyes alone.

Laird & Lee has agreed to print my book, Nate! Mister Lee, who is younger than us, if you can imagine, was meeting in St. Louis with Mr. Pulitzer, and I begged an introduction. He—Mister Lee, that is—was so impressed that he offered me a contract on the spot, and wants to see my second manuscript! He says that he will publish any of my stories, because there is a market for such—and I quote—"fluff". Still, I do not care if he disparages my writing, because I write what I love to read, and now I will be able to share my stories with others like me. And perhaps make enough to support myself, one day. You know that goal is important to me.

As always, keep the news of my manuscript to yourself, please. I will tell my sister and the rest of the family when the time is right. But for now, not even Serena knows of my ambition to write the kind of stories we so loved reading as girls. Only you, Nate, and I trust you.

With deepest affection and trust,  
Wendy



## Thanksgiving, 1883

Thanksgiving dinner had been phenomenal, to no-one's surprise. It was the Barkers' turn to host this year, and though the Carderocks had opted to stay in town, the MacLeods rode over from their nearby ranch. It had been a nice time, and with Molly's cooking, delicious as well. Old Ian had brought his famous dressing, and Ash had requested Tess make her Chinese father's rice-and-vegetable dish. Nate didn't like it, but heard Molly say that Wendy would have liked to try it. He agreed. She had always loved to learn new things about new people.

Pete and Noah had enjoyed having an entire day to play with Jacob, and Cam's latest addition was passed around happily. Little Mae had more of her mother's dark coloring than her big brother Jacob did, and that made her cuter, in Nate's biased opinion. She was able to sit up, now, and Ash's youngest Rose kept toddling over to bring her baby dolls or her brothers' blocks. The little girls seemed best friends already.

Cam was as good a man as any in Nate's opinion, and he was glad his friend had found the happiness and family he'd deserved. A few years before, he'd seen how empty Cam had been, how much the older man wanted the belonging and acceptance a family could bring. Now it was Cam's turn at happiness, and as they piled into the wagon to head back to the Open Skye—the MacLeod ranch—Cam lingered on the porch with Nate.

He looked every inch the proud papa, with little Mae tucked sleepily against his shoulder. Nate nodded at the baby. "She suits you. *Fatherhood* suits you."

"Yeah." Cam lacked Ash's ability to hide his feelings; the older man's face bloomed in a smile. "You've got no idea, Nate. Last year, even *I* had no idea. But being married to a woman I love, who loves me, who's given me two healthy kids... that's... well, that's the best thing I could've hoped for."

Nate didn't reply. He didn't particularly need kids of his own, not with all of the little ones already running around. But to come home every day to a woman who loved him...? That would be pretty incredible.

Something must have shown on his face, or else Cam knew him well enough to understand the direction of his thoughts, because his friend's expression softened. Cam switched the baby to his left side, and put out his hand. "I'm sorry, Nate."

Forcing a small grin for Cam's sake, Nate shook his friend's hand. "Don't be. I'm really happy for you. You got what you

deserved.”

“And you’ll get it too.” Cam squeezed, and then let go. “I had to wait a long time, you know. There’s a lot of heartache before you find this kind of happiness.” Nate snorted at the platitude, and Cam smiled. “Yeah, I know. But one day soon you’ll look back and you won’t even be able to remember this pain.”

“Hope so.” Nate turned to watch the little boys chasing each other around the wagon, while Tess and Molly chatted. Cam propped one hip against the porch railing, and rubbed his daughter’s back. A long moment passed before Nate cleared his throat. “You got any ideas how?”

He heard Cam sigh. “No. You still haven’t heard from her?”

“Nope.”

“Then you’ve got to figure out where your future lies. If it’s with her, you have to make it happen. If it’s not, if she’s part of your past, then you’ve got to figure out how to let her go.”

Nate snorted, and tucked his hands into his armpits, wishing he’d put on his coat to come out. “Easy to say, harder to do.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got a whole winter ahead of you to think. So think about it.”

Turning to his friend, Nate raised one brow. “You honestly believe I ever think about anything else?”

There was a small grin on Cam’s lips, but pity in his eyes, when the older man said “No, I guess not.” When Tess came to bundle up Mae for the ride home, Cam pulled his hat down around his ears, and sent a smile towards the younger man. “Good luck, Nate.”

“Thanks.” And then, long after Molly had herded the boys inside, and Ash and Annie had wandered off towards the stables, Nate stood on the porch, staring at the place where the MacLeods had disappeared over the ridge, thinking about what his friend had said: “I’ll need it.”



“What’s on your mind, kid?” Ash rarely called him ‘kid’ these days, like he used to back before they were full partners. Sometimes it slipped out, though, and Nate knew that happened most when his brother was worried.

So he tried to get rid of his frown when he replied, “Nothing much. Just thinking. Past and present, and all that.”

They were sitting in front of the big fireplace in Molly and Ash’s house, the house that he’d helped his brother improve over the

long winters between the time that he'd come into Ash's life and the Christmas that the Murray sisters had joined them. How many snowy nights had they spent staring into this fireplace, not speaking for hours, but knowing what the other was thinking, feeling? And after Molly married Ash, and their days got fuller, noisier, they still knew that they could each rely on the other to know what needed doing, without having to ask... or speak at all.

But the silent evenings were few and far between now, with Ash's family here, and Nate living in a different house. Ash was a husband and father, and often grabbed Molly and ducked into their room as soon as the kids were asleep. And Nate couldn't blame him. What was he offering in terms of companionship, after all? These days, he mostly moped.

No, Nate didn't begrudge his brother happiness. He knew how lonely Ash had been for so many years, even if his brother hadn't realized it. Hiring Molly as his housekeeper had been the best decision Ash had ever made, and then talking her into marrying him...? That's when, for the first time, Nate had really understood what 'family' really meant. And now, he wanted that same feeling for himself. He wanted that love and acceptance that came from finding someone to love, who loved him back.

He was tired of being part of his brother's story, his brother's life. Sure, he loved Ash, but he wanted his own story, his own life.

He had a nearby house that he only used for sleeping, because it was so empty. It should be filled with laughter and love, the way Molly had filled this house. Between Ash and Molly, and Cam and Tess, and even Sebastian and Serena, he felt like he was missing out. Everyone else had found someone to love, someone who completed their lives. Nate wanted that.

But Cam's words had been circling around in his head all evening. In order to have what his brother had found, Nate was going to have to figure out his future. He'd have to either let Wendy go and try to find happiness elsewhere, or find a way to convince her that she belonged with him.

As if he could read Nate's thoughts—and maybe he could—Ash said, "Past holidays?"

"Like that first Christmas."

There was a flash of white from inside the dark winter beard Ash had already started growing, and Nate knew his brother was smiling. "Molly made everyone presents, remember?"

"It was the first time I'd ever celebrated Christmas. That I could remember, at least."

"Yeah. That look of surprise on your face that morning was something else."

Nate snorted. "That's because you gave me half your ranch."

"You'd earned it. Besides, I'd told you I was gunna do it."

"Yeah, but..."

A long moment, and then Ash nodded and turned back towards the fire. "I know." Neither brother had to say it, but they each knew what the other was feeling.

Nate took a deep breath. "Molly and her sisters taught us what it meant to be a family, you know?"

"I know."

"And that first Christmas, that was like a new beginning."

"Yeah."

Another long silence, during which they could hear Molly walking around upstairs, murmuring to the boys. Then Nate cleared his throat. "Remember how Wendy read that poem? What was its name...?" As if he couldn't recall. As if he didn't remember every aspect of that first holiday with her.

"About St. Nicholas visiting? I remember that you half wanted to believe it."

"Yeah." That Christmas Eve, sitting around this fireplace, Molly and Wendy had introduced the Barker brothers to traditions and history they'd never known. The house had been beautifully decorated, and was finally a home. It was filled with laughter and teasing and love, the way a home should be. And the next Christmas had been even more meaningful, because they'd grown to love each other. And the ones after that, and all the holidays until Wendy had left. Since then, the holidays—especially Christmas—seemed empty.

"So what are you going to do about her?"

Nate turned to Ash, but the older man was still staring at the fire. Sometimes it was nice having a brother who understood what he was thinking, without having to talk about it. Other times it was plain creepy.

"What makes you think...?"

Ash snorted and gave Nate a look that said he shouldn't have to ask. "Because you've been sulking worse than usual today. Because I saw Cam talking to you on the porch. Because you always get like this around holidays... since Wendy left."

"Cam says I've gotta figure out what I want from life, and then figure out how to get it."

"He's right."

"And he says that if I don't want her to be part of my life, I've gotta let her go, and get on with my future."

"Yep." His brother's slow drawl was usually a comfort, but tonight it just irritated Nate. He wanted Ash to *tell* him what to do, like a big brother should. "So what do you want?"

"I don't know!"

"Shhhh!" Both brothers' heads turned at Molly's warning, to see her coming down the back stairs. "Don't you dare wake those two up!" She glared, but Nate knew it was just for show.

Nate and Ash had enclosed the loft the winter after the Murray sisters joined their family. The two younger girls had moved up there, but when Nate moved to his own house, Wendy took his old room. Now Annie and Rose stayed in his room, and the boys were in the loft. So much had changed in the last eight years—had it really been only eight years?—that it was sometimes hard to remember what it had been like when it was just the two brothers.

Molly crossed to the hearth, and ruffled Nate's hair in passing, like she used to do when he was younger. She perched on the arm of Ash's chair, and then gave a squeal when he pulled her onto his lap. Molly wasn't small, but Ash was the biggest man Nate had ever seen, so they were well-matched.

"What are you two down here arguing about?"

"Not arguing, wife. Just saying what a fine dinner that was that you fixed today."

"Yeah, Molly." Nate dipped his chin in tribute. "You out-did yourself. Thanks for your hard work."

His sister-in-law was blushing slightly when she smacked Ash's chest with a smile. "Oh stop it, you two."

"You don't believe us?" Nate's brother tried to look innocent, but that just made his wife smile more.

"Well, thank you, then." She turned another mock-glare on Nate. "But don't lie to me. I'm a confirmed matron, you know, and that gives me the chance to meddle. And I'm a good meddler, when it comes to making sure my loved ones get the Happily Ever Afters that they deserve."

Ash grinned then, another quick flash of white amid the dark beard. "Nate's trying to decide what he wants to do about your sister."

Nate winced and dropped his forehead into one hand, smothering a groan. *Why* did his brother have to be so forthright?

But Molly's smile was sincere and full of affection. "Good! It's about time!" Peeking out at her, Nate saw her expression soften. "Oh, Nate. You know that I love her, but she made her choice when she went off. I love you just as much, and you're here, being miserable. You deserve the chance to make a choice about your future, your happiness. Like she made hers. I want you to be happy too."

Almost four years ago, Wendy had surprised them all by announcing that she wanted to move back east, back to a city like the one she'd grown up in. Only Nate knew that she wanted to write books that might be considered scandalous, especially by a female



author. She hadn't even told Serena that. So in the spring, three years before, the entire family had ridden to Cheyenne to put her on a train heading to St. Louis, where she'd obtained a job as a literature teacher for a high school. Nate could have told her that despite her strength and determination, it was a mistake to take on an entire classroom of boys. She didn't have the patience to tangle with a whole passel of kids, and soon quit to become a tutor for a family with one deaf child.

And for those first two years, she'd written to him every week. Nate—or Ash, or one of the hands—traveled into town once a week to pick up the mail, and drop off their letters to Wendy. He'd never been a real reader until he'd met her, but Wendy taught him to love adventure stories as much as she did. And he'd never been a writer until she left, but he quickly learned to pour out everything—the happenings, the gossip, his past, his feelings—onto paper for her. They had a special bond, and even though he hadn't seen her since the spring of '80, he'd felt that they were closer than ever.

If he hadn't been in love with her when she'd left, he'd sure as hell realized it after a year of writing to her.

And he also realized that he would *never* be what she deserved. She needed city life to stimulate her, and to make a difference in the wider world. She needed someplace where she could really *experience* life... and what could he offer her? The same damn ranch where she'd spent years, and a half-breed bastard who loved her. Nothing near to what she deserved, but he couldn't make himself give her up. Even knowing that he couldn't have her, he kept writing.

But then, last year, she'd stopped sending him letters. She still wrote to her sister and Serena, but even those letters were stilted and awkward, like she was hiding something. Hiding something big. But she'd stopped writing to him altogether, no matter how many letters he sent to her. He'd figured that she'd met a beau who could offer her more than Nate ever could. Who would give her the excitement and experiences that she deserved. But she hadn't mentioned any beau to Molly or Annie or even Serena, and that oversight, that hedging, was what had tormented him for the last year. Why wouldn't she have at least explained her attitude to her sisters?

What was tearing him up inside was the knowledge that she didn't even care enough about him anymore to explain *why* she'd cut him off.

"What's going to make you happy, Nate?"

Ash and Molly were still watching him, patiently. He ran a hand through his hair, and then rubbed the back of his neck, thinking about her question and trying to decide. Finally, he sighed. "I hate not knowing. I've always wanted Wendy in my future, but..." He took a deep breath, weighing the possibilities. "If she doesn't want to be a

part of it, if she's found someone to make her happy in St. Louis, then I need to let her go. To quit sniffing around her skirts like a lost puppy. To cut her out of my life like she cut me out of hers, so I can move on and figure out how to *be* happy without her. But..."

"But you need to know for sure." There was pity in his sister-in-law's eyes, but Nate didn't care.

"Yeah, Molls." He sighed again. "Yeah, I need to know for sure. But as long as she's ignoring my letters, and any reference *you* make to me in your letters, I don't know. I can't know."

Ash's low rumble interrupted. "So go to her."

"What?"

"Go to St. Louis. Find her. Talk to her."

Molly squirmed excitedly. "Yes! Nate, go find her! Face-to-face, she'll *have* to tell you the truth, what she's feeling. She couldn't hide then. You'd have your answer!"

He just stared at them, knowing that the look on his face was part disbelief, part hope. Molly's expression softened. "It would work, Nate. You could do it. Now, while there's less to do on the ranch."

The objections burst out of him, like he was trying to convince himself. "Go to St. Louis? In December? Miss Christmas with all of you? Do you have any idea how much that would cost? And I'd show up there just for what? So she can reject me to my face? Tell me that I'm just some... some nobody, not worth her time?"

"You don't know that." Molly had never liked hearing him talk about himself that way, but he scoffed at her objections. Until his brother spoke up.

"Yeah," Ash said, "And you've moped through the last few Christmases. We covered that already. Go talk to her. Maybe *next* Christmas you won't have to mope."

Molly pushed herself off of Ash's lap, and crossed to Nate's side. Taking one of his hands in both of hers, she squeezed. "Last Thanksgiving, I promised you that she'd be here for this year, do you remember?" Numbly, Nate nodded, still dazed at their suggestion. "I thought I could convince her to come home, but I was wrong. Maybe she doesn't think of this as her home anymore. But without her telling us that, we don't know. As heartsick as you are over her being gone, so am I. I miss her too." She squeezed again. "Please go talk to her. Tell her that we miss her. Find out what she's not telling *us*."

Nate's gaze moved from her to his brother. Ash's expression was unreadable, as always, but Nate saw the approval in those dark eyes. "Do it, kid. I'll pay for the train ticket, if it'll convince you to go. Think of it as a Christmas present." Nate swallowed, not sure what to say to that. "Hell, I should've gone myself, but couldn't leave the ranch and the kids."

“And me!” Molly gave him a good glare, and there was another flash of a smile deep in Ash’s beard.

“And you, sweetheart. I just couldn’t face that city again, not after the life I’ve found—made—out here.” A lifetime ago, Ash had lived in an orphanage in St. Louis. Turning back to Nate, he continued, “But you’re free for now. You not only *can* do this for us, you *need* to do this, for yourself. You’re the one who has to go.”

And suddenly, Nate knew that they were right. He’d always trusted his brother’s advice, and Ash was dead-on this time too. The *only* way Nate was going to figure out what was going on in Wendy’s head was to talk to her face-to-face. It was the only way *any* of them would know.

Looking up at Molly again, he squeezed her hand. “Alright. I’ll do it. I’ll go to St. Louis and find her.”

His sister-in-law’s smile was pleased. “Thank you, Nate.”

He snorted. “I should be thanking you for talking me into it.”

“True.” She squeezed his hand one more time, and then pulled free to rumble his hair again. Like he was a kid. “But you’ll be bringing me peace of mind by doing it. And maybe you’ll even be bringing her home!”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Molls. She must be happy there. I’m sure she wants to stay. And me...” He looked at Ash. “This is my home. I can’t imagine giving it up.”

Molly sighed, and dropped a kiss to his forehead. “I know, Nate. I know.”

His decision made, Nate took a deep breath. “So, when should I leave?”

As they got down to the business of planning his trip, he couldn’t figure out if he was excited or nervous about the prospect. One way or another, in a few weeks he’d have answers to the questions that had been plaguing him for well over a year.

## CHAPTER THREE



*May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1882*

*Nate,*

*I am sure that you have read my missive to Molly, so I will not elaborate on the Easter season. As last year and the one before, I missed my loved ones, but am pleased to be here. The city is truly bustling, and I have learned so much. As I spoke of upon first journeying here, I have found my place. I am making a difference, and know that this is where I belong. My books are selling, I have all the time I need to write, and my new position with the Blakely family is ideal. I feel like I could stay here forever. This has become my home, and I am pleased for it.*

*I am not without friends here, so do not fret for my well-being. Little Jeremy's oldest siblings are close to my age, and I have high hopes that I can become close with one of his sisters. Likewise, the oldest brother Steven is a debonair gentleman about my years. From the time I have spent with him, I know that we can be friends.*

*I am happy here, Nate. Please be happy for me.*

*Your friend,  
Wendy*



*December 11, 1883*

How many times had he re-read that letter? Too many to count. The damn thing had been folded and re-folded so many times that it was in danger of falling apart. It was a goodbye if Nate had ever heard one. *"I'm happy here... please be happy for me?"* Yep, that was "goodbye".

What bothered Nate about it, what had always bothered him, was that casual reference to "Steven". It didn't take much to imagine a slick city-boy, all duded out in the latest fashions, with oily hair and manners. Of *course* someone like that would "be friends" with someone as beautiful as Wendy. Hell, maybe this Steven was the reason she'd stopped writing him, had been ignoring her family for so long. If he was, Nate looked forward to meeting the man... and taking his anger out on him.

Sighing, Nate folded the letter once more and shoved it into the breast pocket of his duster. Despite the anger and sadness, he'd never been able to make himself throw out Wendy's last letter to him.

He was standing on the platform of Cheyenne's train depot, his bag beside him, staring down the track. There was a storm brewing, which is why he'd said his goodbyes to Ash, Molly, Annie and the kids already, and sent them on their way to the Carderocks' house. They didn't need to be caught in a snowstorm, not for him.

He was remembering one other time that he'd stood here, trying to board a train. He'd been heading west then, or anywhere he could go to get away from Cheyenne. And he would have, if there'd been a stockcar for his horse that day. As it was, he met Molly in the station—almost exactly eight years ago. And then Ash had found them both. She'd tried to protect him from Ash's anger, but didn't realize his brother had been angry *for* him, not *at* him. Hell, not even Nate had understood that at the time. All he'd known was that he was furious with his brother for never *listening* to his suggestions and ideas, and had decided to take himself off somewhere where *someone* would listen to him. Ash had come after him, terrified of what might have happened to a kid like him. And then, a few weeks later, had given him a full share in the ranch, proving that he *did* listen and care about Nate's plans for the future.

His life—all of their lives—had changed for the better that day on this platform, when he'd met Molly. And now, he was fixing to change his life again. He didn't know what waited for him in St. Louis, but figured one way or the other, he'd get his answers. He'd know if Wendy was in trouble, or if she'd fallen in love with someone else, or if she'd finally figured out that he wasn't good enough for her, and had moved on. He'd know, and then could come back home and tell the rest of the family, and try to get on with his life.

The train whistle shook him from his thoughts, and he stepped

back from the edge as the great locomotive chugged by. Then, hefting his small pack and handing his ticket to the conductor, he stepped on board and found a seat. As the train steamed out of the city, it struck Nate as a little ironic that this was his first time on one.

He'd been born in a rail camp, the son of a half-Indian whore and God knows what father. It was just bad luck that he looked so much like an Indian, when he had three white grandparents. He'd spent his early years traveling west with his mother, following the railroad workers, until he was old enough to do small jobs for small money. When his mother died, he was only about six, and had no one else. So he kept on with Union Pacific, doing whatever work they'd give him. The men pushing the rails west were big men, tough men, and didn't have much use for a scrawny Indian kid.

One spring evening, in Cheyenne—which was the middle of nowhere then—he was getting clobbered pretty bad by a drunk. A lot of that time was a hazy blur now, but Nate clearly remembered Ash's roar as he pulled the man off of Nate. The next day, seven-year-old Nate had quit the railroad, figuring he'd rather take his chances with the only man who'd ever stood up for him. He'd walked for two days, following Ash's trail, until he'd collapsed. When Ash found him and took him home, Nate forced himself to be as useful as possible. By the time Ash had found the time—and the inclination—to take him back to Cheyenne, Nate had made himself part of life on the ranch. Once he'd realized that Ash was going to let him stay, he'd made himself at home.

Nate couldn't remember when he'd first called Ash "big brother", but by the following summer, that's who they were: the Barker brothers. He'd spent eight years thinking of himself as a charity case, knowing that Ash had only taken him in and fed him out of pity. And after he'd turned fifteen or so, he'd fought so much with his brother that he considered leaving Cheyenne altogether. But then Ash gave him—*gave him*—half the ranch, and started the horse breeding program Nate had been pushing. That, more than anything else in his short life, had proved to Nate how much Ash valued him. They'd been full partners for the last eight years, and trusted each other beyond a shadow of a doubt. And though they rarely said it, they loved each other. They were brothers.

Nate might have been born lower than dirt—a half-breed whore's bastard—but he'd built himself a life he'd be proud to share with some woman. The problem was that the only woman he'd ever wanted to share it with apparently had no interest in sharing it with him.

Ash had *always* given him good advice, and this time was no different. Nate had to make this trip, to figure out what was going on

in Wendy's head. To get closure, for himself and for the rest of the family.

Nate sighed, watching the landscape zip past at a faster speed than he could have imagined. He remembered that first letter Wendy had written him, about her trip east. He'd saved it, of course. She'd written about some good coming from his childhood struggles. He wasn't so sure she was right.

The bench was hard, but he'd been on worse. He crossed his arms and tilted his hat forward to cover his eyes. He might not be a cowboy, but he'd spent years riding the range, and knew how to sleep wherever he could. Propping his head against the window, he let the steady sway of the carriage lull him, and tried not to think about what he'd find when they finally made it to St. Louis.

Tried not to think about Wendy.

## CHAPTER FOUR



December 15, 1883

*Strong hands wrapped through her thick, dark hair, pulling her head back. She could feel his hot breath on her exposed neck, and it sent shivers down her spine. "You thought you were safe, my pretty," he hissed, "But you'll never be free of me. I am a hunter." In terrified anticipation, she had somehow forgotten to breathe. She thought she might faint. "And now, Dolcezza, you are my prey. I have trapped you, and will devour*

There was a knock at the door.

Wendy scowled, knowing how easy her concentration could be broken. Her pencil hovered over the paper, and she forced herself to focus.

*I have trapped you, and will devour... you. Because... ummm... Because you have led me on a merry chase, and I want...I want...*

Damn. She tossed the pencil down, and pulled off her spectacles to pinch the bridge of her nose. She'd been doing so well, with the words just tumbling out in their haste to get down on the paper. It was so much easier to write when she didn't have to think about it. She just created the characters and they ran free, writing their own stories. When she actually had to *think* about the plot, things got choppy. Now she'd have to figure out *why* the Count had lured Sofia to his castle in the first place, instead of just letting *him* tell it. The noise she made was somewhere between a sigh and a growl.

She had a limited amount of time to write each day, and she hated to miss any of it. Mrs. Blakely 'graciously' allowed her to use the front parlor early every afternoon, while Jeremy was resting. Doubtless the woman thought she was in here frantically scribbling in journals or correspondence. But Wendy rarely wrote home these days, preferring to keep her shame to herself. Instead, she immersed herself



in her stories, and as a result, had sold quite a number of them. Of course, those stories had taken a dark turn over the last year, now that she wasn't the young innocent she once was... she no longer believed in True Love, and as a result, neither did her heroines.

Another knock at the front door.

She frowned now, wondering why Martin hadn't answered it already. Whoever it was surely had business, or they wouldn't have bothered knocking twice. But why not use the bell pull? Martin must be in the kitchen; he would have heard the bell, but hadn't heard the knock. She willed whoever it was to go away, so that she could get back to her writing.

Mrs. Blakely had *very* clear ideas about Wendy's place in her household. As little Jeremy's tutor, she wasn't quite a servant, but she definitely wasn't family. So much for all of the high hopes she'd had when she joined the Blakely household after Suzanna Mulligan left for school in Boston. Wendy had seen the sprawling—and *very* well-connected—Blakely family as a chance to better her situation. There were so many young women; surely there'd be a chance for friendship! But the Blakely daughters had no interest in getting to know their youngest brother's new "deaf teacher", and the girls engaged as servants saw Wendy as above their station. Mrs. Blakely—and Mr. Blakely, when he could be bothered to remember her—treated her as one step above a maid, but very definitely *not* a member of the household. She was expected to adhere to strict rules concerning her behavior, and rarely had a chance to socialize outside of the house. And even then, it was under Mrs. Blakely's fierce gaze.

So Wendy found it easiest to tutor Jeremy as she'd been hired to do, and stay in her room otherwise. But she did her best writing at this little ladies' desk in the small parlor, with the view of the idyllic snowy street out front. It was usually her best chance to pen a chapter or—

*Another* knock?

Good Heavens, did the person not realize that the butler wasn't available? Why weren't they ringing? With a *harrumph*, she very deliberately put down her pencil and stood, smoothing her skirt. Lord knew what Mrs. Blakely would say if she discovered that Wendy had answered the front door, like a servant would. On the other hand, it was hard to read the termagant's mind; maybe she would be pleased to see Wendy taking initiative. Either way, the caller was expecting an answer, so it was up to Wendy to greet him or her. Perhaps, in her simple blue skirt and prim white blouse, they would just assume that she was the downstairs maid.

She sighed and crossed the room. Peeking out into the foyer, she checked for Martin or one of the other servants, just in case one

had come to rescue her from the task. No such luck. Perhaps whoever had been knocking had given up and gone away, and she could get back to her writing before Jeremy's rest time was over.

So she plastered a serene smile on her face, and pulled the large oak door open a bit. Seeing the... the *apparition* on the front porch, she opened the door wider, almost unconsciously. He looked like something out of a novel. Not one of *her* novels, of course, but something similar. Tall, and draped in a dark duster that reached his knees, with a hat pulled so low over long dark hair that she couldn't see anything of his features. Cowboy boots stood in the light dusting of snow beside a small bag, and the lack of footprints told her that he'd been standing still here the entire time. No shifting, no shuffling. Just patience and serenity and *goodness* she was waxing poetic, wasn't she?

The stranger had affected her somehow. She was short of breath, and felt her pulse speed up a bit, the way it always did when she was beginning a story and the possibilities were opening before her. He'd captured her imagination, just by standing there. *Oh no, have I just been standing here too, this whole time?* With the door open, and her mouth agape? Oh goodness, he probably thought she was some kind of ninny.

Closing her jaw with a snap, she blinked and cleared her throat. Wondering if she'd be able to imprint this scene—the stranger's darkness against the snow, the sun high overhead—on her mind so that she could write it later, Wendy tried for a small smile. Conscious of standing on the doorstep, letting the heat out into the winter afternoon, she said "I'm sorry for the wait. You didn't ring the bell," she pointed to the cord hanging to the left of the jamb, untouched, "so it took a while to hear your knock." Flustered, she realized that she was making a mess of things. Another deep breath. "May I help you?"

One dark hand snaked from the pocket of his duster, and pushed the brim of the hat up. She could see dark hair around his collar, and deeply tanned skin around his jaw, and then she wasn't thinking anymore. Staring out from beneath that hat were the most beautiful green eyes, eyes she'd been dreaming about for years. A coincidence, surely? But then they crinkled, like they'd always done when he smiled. Bright teeth against dark skin, just like she remembered, and now she felt short of breath for an entirely different reason.

"Hi, Wendy."

It was the rescue she'd been dreading—and secretly dreaming about—for the last year.

Nate had come for her.



Damn, but she was just as beautiful as he remembered. No, that's... that wasn't entirely true. She'd changed a bit. She was older, more mature now. Behind the eyeglasses she wore—a different pair than when he'd last seen her—her blue eyes seemed hooded, more distant. She'd cut her hair short, too, so that it surrounded her head like a crown of brown curls. Nate's hands itched to run his fingers through it, to find out if it was as soft as he remembered. Instead, he fisted them, and forced himself to focus on the here-and-now.

She'd been standing in that doorway for a long time. He wondered what was going through her mind, the way she was staring at him. He always could read her face, and know what she was thinking. She'd been irritated when she answered the door, and then had just stood there, with a goofy, dreamy expression. Now he could swear that she was worried, but about what? Worried that he was here? Had she not recognized him?

“Wendy?”

She shook her head slightly, and blinked. Peeking furtively over her shoulder, she reached out and grabbed one of his hands. He was so surprised he almost forgot to snag his pack as she pulled him through the door into the grandest house he'd ever seen. It made the Carderocks' new place in Cheyenne look tiny, and was even more impressive inside than it had been from the street. There was tile on the floor, and patterned wallpaper, and an actual frieze around the ceiling. The staircase was strung in garland and bows, and a huge Christmas tree stood like a sparkly sentinel, its top almost reaching the second-floor landing. Nate felt like he'd stepped into a painting. Someone like him didn't belong somewhere like this.

Wendy, though, in her elegant skirt—there was even one of those bustles over her rear end!—and the lace around her collar, looked right at home here. He'd known that this was one of the reasons she'd left Cheyenne; the chance to live an elegant life. A life he couldn't give her. She was just as fancy as Serena had ever been, now. She looked comfortable... but not quite happy.

While he'd been staring, she hustled him into a room—some kind of parlor—and shut the door behind them. Then, gesturing to him to remain quiet, she cracked the door and peeked back into the foyer. Apparently satisfied that no one knew of his arrival, she closed the door again quietly with a sigh.

Was she ashamed of him, then? That he would come visit her in her fancy new house? “Are you going to get in trouble, being seen

with me?" *With someone like me?* He hid his wince, and hoped he didn't sound as childish as he thought. He crossed to the little desk in front of the window, and pretended great interest in the view beyond the little evergreen wreath.

When she didn't immediately scoff at his question, he turned to see her looking mighty unsure. She'd always had this nervous habit of wringing her hands that he'd always thought was adorable, and she was doing it now. "What?" Had he been right?

"Mrs. Blakely, my employer, is... rather strict. She'd be upset to find out that you came in the front door, or that I was entertaining you without permission."

Nate's jaw hardened. So he wasn't even good enough to come through the front door? He took his hat off and tossed it on top of his pack, running his other hand through his hair. She was watching him, and must have seen the old bitterness in his expression, because she hurried say, "It's not *you*, Nate. It's anyone. It's me. She's... she has some very firm beliefs about 'the serving class'."

"And that's you?" Like her, he kept his voice low. Were they hiding from Mrs. Blakely, then?

"Oh yes." Her response was just a whisper, and he watched her shoulders slump a bit further.

"She sounds like a real peach."

Well, that did it. Wendy's jaw cocked out mulishly, and her back straightened. Nate knew it was because she was getting defensive of her life here. "I have survived her employment for well over a year. I am treated well."

"Is she the reason you stopped writing me?"

There. He'd asked the question that had been on his mind for a year and a half. He'd barely exchanged six other words with her, and now he'd just blurted it out, and not kindly either. Her face paled at his veiled accusation, but she didn't respond.

After a long moment of silence, Nate sighed. "Sorry, Wendy. Didn't mean to get into that so early." A weak smile, as she crossed to the settee and sunk down onto it.

She looked... drained. Not her normal self. She was paler and thinner than she'd been three years before. Now that he was seeing her in the light—this place had real electric lights!—he could tell that she wasn't quite the unchanged beauty he'd thought on the doorstep. Still Wendy, yeah, but... less so. He wondered what had happened in the last years to make her seem so diminished. Or was it only his words to her that made her seem that way? Was it guilt?

"I'd ask you what brought you to St. Louis," even her voice sounded weaker, "but I don't think I want to know."

Keeping in mind her reaction to his last question, Nate

mumbled “Probably not” and turned back to the window. His eye was caught by the journal and pencil on the desk. More for something to distract him than actual interest, he picked it up, and flipped through the last pages. It looked like she was working on a new book.

He read over the paragraph she must have been writing before she’d come to open the door for him. Then he went back and read the page before, and the page before that. Flipping through the pages, he glanced up at her. “This is good, Wendy.”

Her eyes were big, focused on the journal in his hands. What did she think he was going to do with it? He saw her swallow, as if nervous.

“Seriously, I can’t wait to read this one.” He tried a smile, to put her at ease. It didn’t quite work. “But when are you going to write the sequel to Bettina and the Pirate King? You left them in pretty dire straits.”

Slowly, she blinked, and switched her confused gaze from the book to his face. “You read that?”

“Sure.” He snapped the journal closed and put it back on the desk, leaning one hip against the windowsill. “I’ve read all of your books. So has Serena, but she hasn’t figured out who ‘W. Jones’ is, or why I keep lending her his books.”

“Considering what I’m trying to do here, and the reaction I’d get if it was discovered I wrote novels of that nature, I thought a *nom de plume* was in order.”

Nate didn’t know what a “nommed eplum” was, but he nodded anyhow.

Wendy swallowed, looking unsure again. “You... You’ve really read *all* of my books?”

“Sure, yeah. I hated reading before you moved in with us, but the way you used to read those adventure novels, and the ones you lent me... Well, I like these kinds of stories.” He shrugged. “And I like you, so of course I’m going to read what you write.”

“Oh.”

She looked so small and delicate, which he knew she wasn’t. She’d always been so strong and confident and capable. “Serena’s teaching literature—like, fancy famous dead authors and whatnot—at the school. But she still reads these Gothic stories for fun. Sometimes we share books.”

“Yes.” She looked down at her hands then, and her voice lowered even more. “She said that in her letters.”

“Yeah.”

*Dammit.* They used to be able to talk for hours about anything and everything. They used to be able to write pages and pages to each other. *Why* was this conversation the most awkward, stilted one he’d

ever been a part of? He traveled halfway across the country—he'd been sleeping on benches in stations, for crying out loud!—for *this*?

After three years of waiting, here she was. They were standing in the same room, he was actually *looking* at her. He could take her in his arms any time he chose. He could kiss her, like he should have done before she left. He could show her what her absence had done to him.

But his pride wouldn't let him do any of those things until he knew why she'd cut him off. Why she was so diminished, so drawn. Why she'd been avoiding him for the last year.

"Wendy, I..." *I've missed you.* But how was that going to help? It wouldn't; it would just make her more withdrawn. Wasn't there *something* he could do to remind her of their friendship?

He never got the chance to find out, though. The door suddenly opened, and a tall woman with a sharp nose and chin swept into the room. Wendy jumped, as if guilty, even though she was sitting on the other side of the room from him.

"Just *what* is going on here?" Judging from this lady's commanding presence, this had to be Mrs. Blakely. She glared down her hatchet-shaped nose at Nate, as if he was something rotten the dog had dragged in from the yard.

He felt his jaw hardened, and opened his mouth to respond to her rudeness. But before he could think of what to say, Wendy interrupted. "Mrs. Blakely, this is Nate Barker." She'd stood and gestured towards him. "My sister's brother-in-law. You'll remember that she married Ash Barker, who owns a ranch in Wyoming? Nate owns the other half."

Swallowing his bitterness, Nate nodded as politely as he could. "How do you do, Mrs. Blakely?"

Her lip curled slightly as she looked over his dirty duster and muddy boots. Then, dismissing him, she turned back to Wendy. "Miss Murray, you *never* mentioned that your sister married an *Indian*. How could you possibly neglect to tell us something so *dreadfully* significant?"

Now it was Wendy's turn to be speechless, and Nate couldn't blame her. He'd heard a lot of vitriol in his life, but never from someone who'd dismissed him as something sub-human. He wanted to tell Mrs. Blakely that he was adopted, that Ash was a fine *white* man, and didn't deserve to be tarred with the same brush. But before he could, Wendy saved him. Again.

"Because, Mrs. Blakely, I hardly thought that my personal family history had *anything* to do with my ability to tutor Jeremy." Her shoulders had straightened, and Nate could see a flash of the old fire in her dark blue eyes.

“On the contrary, Miss Murray. Your ability was based on your history with the Mulligans, the school, and teaching *your sister*. Had I known that your family was associated with common heathens—”

“My older sister’s marriage choices have *nothing* to do with how or what I taught my younger sister. Have you been satisfied with my results thus far?”

Nate felt impotent, standing by and watching Wendy fight for him, but he had to admit that she looked more alive now than she had a moment before. And the simple fact that she *was* defending him meant that she wasn’t as indifferent to him as he’d feared.

Mrs. Blakely *harrumphed*, and raised her chin even further. “No. You have worked wonders with Jeremy. He’ll be ready to be sent to school soon.”

“Indeed.”

“But that doesn’t give you the right to invite whomever you want into my home.” Her gaze slanted back towards Nate, and he raised a brow at her. His response seemed to fluster her. “In the future, do your socializing *outside* of this house.”

Wendy scoffed. “You can’t be serious, Mrs. Blakely. Nate has traveled close to a thousand miles to visit me, and as I am living here now, I should have the right to entertain him—”

“Absolutely not. Someone—*the children*, even!—might see him.” Then she relented a bit, with one more haughty glance at Nate. “But since tomorrow is Sunday, you are—I suppose—free to go where you’d like.”

Nate could tell that Wendy was furious, just from the pink tint to her cheeks, and the lightning in her eyes. He used to say that she could curdle milk when she was livid. But it seemed like she’d gotten some control in the years she’d been living in this fancy city; he didn’t think Mrs. Blakely could even tell how angry Wendy really was. Of course, Mrs. Blakely didn’t seem to be the type to notice much beyond her own nose.

That Wendy was angry on *his* behalf made him so pleased that he pushed Mrs. Blakely’s hatred and bigotry aside. In fact, when the older lady glanced at him, he even gave her a bit of a mocking smile. Her eyes opened wide in shock, and she flounced out of the room as quickly as she’d come in.

Silence descended with her retreat. Wendy looked at him, and then looked away. Remembering the way she’d stuck up for him, Nate smiled, and then started chuckling. She glanced back at him, quickly, worry evident in her expression.

“Nate? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” His chuckles subsided. “Just that I’ve missed your temper. I’ve forgotten what a sight you are, when you get all fired up

like that.”

She flushed, and glanced towards the door. “I probably shouldn’t have said anything, but her narrow-minded opinions have always made me so *angry*.”

Feeling bolder now, he crossed the room, and took her hand in both of his. “Thanks for standing up for me, Wendy.”

Her eyes were a blue a few shades darker than Annie’s. They’d always reminded him of the sky right as the sunrise started chasing the dark away. To Nate, they seemed full of possibilities, just like each dawn. And now, after so long, they were staring up into his, separated only by a few panes of glass.

“Nate, I...” She trailed off, as her gaze switched to his lips. He wondered what she was thinking. Was she thinking about him kissing her? Because that’s for damn sure what *he* was thinking about.

“Yeah?” They were leaning towards one another, and Nate’s drawl was a mere whisper. He could feel her breath on his lips, and his heart started beating faster. More than anything else, he wanted to taste her, to find out if she was as good as he’d imagined all these years.

“I...” Suddenly, she blinked, and pulled away. Taking a step back, she pulled her hand from his, and clasped it to her waist. Now looking at anywhere but him, she turned away. He saw her take a deep breath, and then another. He was doing the same thing, trying to rein his arousal in after that almost-kiss.

“I think you should probably leave, Nate.”

He narrowed his eyes. This entire visit had just been a series of ups and downs, hadn’t it? Did she have any feelings for him? Did she want him gone from her life? Were they still friends? Between her awkward reception, her defense of him, and that... that... *whatever the hell* that almost-kiss was, he had more questions now than when he’d left Cheyenne.

He didn’t say anything, though. Just crossed back to his things, and jammed his hat back on his head. Turning to find her holding the parlor door opened, he made sure to brush past her as close as possible. He hoped that little shudder he saw wasn’t in his imagination, because it meant that she wasn’t as immune to him as she was trying to be.

Halting in the foyer, before the main door, he turned. “I’ll come in the back way, tomorrow, Wendy. Because I *am* coming for you. If you’ve got the day off, you’re spending it with me.” After this meeting, he needed *some* kind of context, to figure out what was going on in her head.

Thankfully, she didn’t argue, but only nodded. “Yes. That would be...nice.” She glanced over her shoulder once, and then turned



a hesitant grin on him. It wasn't the Wendy smile he'd remembered for three long years, but it was a start. "Ten o'clock, by the back door. I'll be waiting for you, Nate."

It wasn't until the door had closed behind him and he stood in the middle of a snow-covered St. Louis sidewalk that he'd realized he'd been hoping to hear those words. *I'll be waiting for you, Nate*. Had she? Had she been waiting for him?

Thinking of that smile, he had to wonder. *What* had happened to her, in the last three years, which had made her change so much? What was she scared of? And could he help her?

Because more than anything, Nate wanted the friendship, the trust, back. And once he gained those things, he could work on her love.

## CHAPTER FIVE



One thing Wendy had learned after a year of living with the Blakelys was that she couldn't afford to be distracted by private thoughts. Mrs. Blakely was like a bloodhound, in her efforts to sniff out what she thought were secrets. So Wendy pushed her thoughts of Nate—and his return to her life—from her mind as much as possible. She'd have the chance to pull out her memories of him standing there on the porch later, when she was alone.

For now, she focused on her sessions with Jeremy. He really was coming along wonderfully, and would be ready to go off to one of the private schools within the year. Wendy knew that the Blakelys wanted the best for their youngest child—born to them late in their lives—but didn't know how exactly to do that. Jeremy would almost certainly be bundled off to a school for the deaf in Boston or Philadelphia, where someone with more skills than she had could teach him how to speak with the new oralist techniques Serena had written about. But it would be a hard transition for a boy who'd spent seven short years surrounded by a large and overbearing family.

For now, all she could do was focus on his reading and writing, and help him modify his 'language' of signs the Blakelys had made up to help him communicate.

After his afternoon lessons, Wendy bundled up Jeremy for their constitutional walk around the nearby Lafayette Square. Even then, he was active enough that Wendy couldn't let her mind wander back to Nate. No, Jeremy was a handful, probably a result of being the youngest of seven children, and often used his deafness as an excuse not to follow directions. Wendy knew that part of Mrs. Blakely's expectations for her was to drill some discipline into the boy. It wasn't easy, but Wendy still preferred it to the frustrations of dealing with an entire classroom of children.

After saving the boy from a near-miss with a carriage, and explaining emphatically—sometimes she wished there was a way to yell while using sign—that *no*, he couldn't go out to test the ice on the fishing pond, Wendy brought Jeremy home for dinner. She shared it with him and his next-oldest sisters, Stephanie and Laura, and their

nanny Miss Dunn. They ate in the dining room, and it was, as always, a somber and boring meal. Miss Dunn, an elderly schoolmarm of a woman, had raised all four of the Blakely daughters to be as humorless and haughty as their mother. Between the two of them, it was no wonder that Wendy had never been able to befriend the third sister, Jean, before she married last July. So each evening, she sat quietly beside Jeremy and listened to Miss Dunn lead Stephanie and Laura in conversations about Psalms or bonnet fashions. Whenever Wendy tried to start a discussion about the latest newssheet article she'd read, Miss Dunn would glare her into silence. And she was rarely allowed to translate for Jeremy, since Miss Dunn viewed "all that ridiculous hand-waving" as a distraction from digestion.

As always, Wendy excused herself immediately after dinner. Jeremy had such little time to himself as it was that she knew he liked reigning over the nursery until bedtime. He was reenacting Wellington's victory at Waterloo with an ancient set of wooden soldiers that Wendy's nephews would probably kill for, and she wished him well at it. He was an active boy, surrounded by a family who didn't understand him, and sisters and a nanny who wanted to stifle him. If bombarding Napoleon's forces in his own weird, broken language would make him happy, then she wished him well of it.

Normally Wendy dreaded retiring so early to her orderly little room, especially with the early darkness the winter brought. But today, she'd been looking forward to savoring her memories of Nate. As soon as the door closed behind her, she let her shoulders slump out of the prim and erect posture Mrs. Blakely insisted ladies employ, and breathed a sigh of relief.

He was here. He was *here*. He was here! He was here!

She hugged herself, and gave a little dance around the room, careful not to let the giggles that had threatened every time she thought of Nate slip free. He was actually *here*, in St. Louis, at the Blakelys' house, and she was going to see him again *tomorrow*.

Nate had come for her. She sighed. He was her oldest... well, he started out as a friend, but then became... a comfort. A champion. She'd first met him the Christmas of '75, when she and Annie had traveled to Cheyenne to find that their sister had married Nate's brother Ash. Ash was a good man, who made them all part of his family. But still, Wendy had been terrified—although she'd *never* show it—of her new world, her new life. And when she'd met her new family, she'd been even more shocked. There was *no way* she'd be expected to live with someone as disarmingly handsome as Nate Barker.

But then she had gotten to know him, the real him. Knew his uncertainties, his fears of inadequacy. Knew his kindness and bravery

and sense of humor and strength and ambitions. And suddenly he was so much more than a handsome brother-in-law. He was her friend, her confidant, and he taught her so much.

She'd let him see her true self, and she thought she'd seen the real him. Around strangers he was reserved and suspicious, but when he was with his family he was outgoing and full of laughter. But seeing him today in the Blakely parlor, he seemed to be more like his brother; so serious and reticent. He looked like he'd become used to hiding his thoughts and feelings, and that saddened Wendy. What had changed him? What had happened to him in the last three years since she'd seen him? In the last year since she'd stopped writing?

If she hadn't felt guilty before, she did now. He'd been her friend. That first winter after she and Annie had moved to Cheyenne, he was the one who taught her that she *would* survive out in the middle of the Wyoming Territory, and that she *could* let down her guard and share her fears with someone. He taught her that she could rely on him, and that he would be her champion. And in return, she taught him about her world; her world of books and stories. They spent many hours during the long evenings of that first winter, reading to one another.

She'd met Serena Selkirk, the daughter of the neighboring rancher, the following spring. Wendy and Serena had forged an immediate bond, and soon became best friends. Every young woman needs a girlfriend outside of her family, to share in her hopes and loves and giggles. Wendy sighed. Good Heavens, she'd been so naïve and silly then. She missed those days with all of her being, wishing she could go back to the carefree and happy girl she'd been then.

Nate hadn't begrudged her friendship with Serena. No, far from it, he seemed happy to see her spreading her wings and becoming so comfortable in her new home. Between the two of them, Serena and Nate taught her to love the rolling hills of the ranch, and the feeling of rushing across them on a fast horse. She'd grown to love the sunsets and the flowers and even the snows. And during the next winter, when she was stuck inside with her family and adorable baby Pete, Wendy renewed her friendship with Nate. He'd been there all along, happy to spend time with her when she was able to make it.

He'd always been there, waiting for her.

Arms still wrapped around her middle, Wendy sunk to the bed. He'd always been there, waiting for her. She'd been afraid that he'd keep waiting when she'd left. And he had. Oh, she'd seen it, in his letters, but had ignored it, had hoped he'd find a more worthy woman to lo—

She didn't let herself finish that thought.

*Oh God.* Her stomach heaved. She was *so selfish*. She'd ignored

him in her quest to fulfil her *own* needs and desires, to see more of the world. And then, when she thought she'd found her place, she'd tried to cut him off. But it hadn't worked; he'd kept writing.

Kept waiting.

She'd known. She'd always known. Just like she'd known that she was doing what was best for *her* by coming to St. Louis. But she'd been wrong about that, too.

She squeezed her eyes shut on the tears that threatened and took a deep breath.

He was here. He was coming back tomorrow. After three long years of not seeing him, after well over a year of not writing to him, he was *here*.

And tomorrow, he'd expect her to explain why she'd cut him out of her life. Explain why it was for the best that he not think about her anymore. Explain why she couldn't be his friend.

Wendy took a deep breath, held it, and then slowly let it out, forcing herself to relax. She didn't know what tomorrow would bring. All she knew was that, despite her intentions, despite her actions, she was inexplicably happy to see Nate, and was looking forward to spending time with him.

Would she be able to explain? Would she be able to hurt him even further? If she told him the truth about why she'd stopped writing, he wouldn't be hurt. He'd be... furious, probably. If she explained that he was far too good, too noble, too admirable for someone like her, he wouldn't believe her. And then she'd have to convince him, which would be painful for both of them.

Perhaps the best option would be to stall, to give him half-answers and redirection, until he went home. After all, he was just visiting. There was no need for her to pour out all of her horrible secrets, to burden him with them. She could convince him that she was happy here, and he could go back home and tell her family that. It would be better for him if he thought she was where she was supposed to be... like she'd told him last year, when she stopped writing to him.

Writing... she'd feel better if she could manage to lose herself for an hour or so before bed. If she could immerse herself in her latest story. Wendy knew that she sometimes ignored the reality around her to focus on her story and characters, but she allowed herself to do it because it worked. After writing, she always felt better, and could often think more rationally. And now that she was getting *paid* for her stories, she felt justified. After all, it was her job to write, now. Besides, she could often find a way to pour her emotions and worries into her stories, making them more realistic and giving her a kind of catharsis.

Resolved, she crossed the room to her organized, over-filled bookshelf and found the journal with her latest story. She sat at the small table, and pulled the small old-fashioned lady's lap desk towards her. She'd purchased it here in St. Louis, having fallen in love with the scrollwork on the top, and often used it here in her room, where writing surfaces were limited. Lifting the lid, she found a sharpened pencil, and opened the journal.

*Now let's see....* "I have trapped you, and will devour you. Because you have led me on a merry chase, and I want..."

Wendy stared at the words for several minutes, before realizing that she wasn't seeing them. She wasn't even thinking about the Count, or poor Sophia. Despite her best intentions to lose herself in her writing, to not think about Nate's return to her life or tomorrow's necessary performance, she couldn't stop remembering the way he'd looked there on the doorstep.

Slowly, deliberately, as if afraid she'd lose the image if she rushed, Wendy turned over several pages in the journal. Then, pencil poised over a new, blank page, she allowed herself to revel in the memory of him, in her reaction to him.

*The sun reflecting off the snow behind him gave him a sort of otherworldly glow she had never seen before. Who was this stranger, come to rescue her? His long black coat seemed to cloak him in possibilities, but she was not afraid. No, instead, his calmness had infected her. She took a breath, and another, in tandem with the rise and fall of those straight shoulders. She couldn't see his eyes under the brim of his hat, but knew they were a green she hadn't seen in years.*

*"I have come for you."*

*And he had. He had come to rescue her from the Hell she had created around herself. He was her Hero, striding*

Wendy blinked. Took her pencil from the paper for a moment. When had she last written a true Hero? A hero worth sighing over? Not since she'd moved to the Blakelys' house, *that* was for certain. Her stories had taken a decidedly darker tone since she'd realized what men were capable of. She no longer wrote about young innocents and True Love. But here she was, writing a Hero again. The kind of Hero she'd dreamed of when she was younger, and giggled over with Serena, and gave up hoping for long ago...

*He was her Hero, striding in, not riding on a white horse. He was tall and strong. His hands were tanned a nut-brown, with long, lithe fingers she longed to touch. Longed to feel their touch. She swallowed the giddiness that threatened to overwhelm her, and forced herself to breathe. He'd come for her. Her Hero had come for her.*

## CHAPTER SIX



St. Louis was crisscrossed with tracks for street cars. Nate had heard that they were planning them in Cheyenne, but hadn't ever actually seen any. They were a weird cross between a train car on tracks, and a horse-drawn wagon. He'd paid the driver when he'd gotten on, so when the street car reached the junction with Pratte Avenue, he just stepped off and started towards the Blakelys' house.

It had snowed during the night, but it didn't seem to affect life in the big city. Of course, the snow wasn't particularly deep, just heavy and thick enough to muffle sounds and mute harsh lines. It was Nate's favorite kind of snow, and he wondered if Wendy remembered playing in it when they were kids.

Those winters they'd spent together when they were both discovering each other and themselves... those had been pretty special. *She* had been pretty special. She was the first person—besides her sisters and Ash—who hadn't seemed to care about his Indian blood. He'd been so nervous around her at first, afraid that she'd think less of him, and desperately wanting to be worthy of her friendship. Of her affection. But after two winters of being constantly with her, of knowing her and understanding her, he'd realized that Wendy just didn't notice the fact that he was Indian. Or if she did, it didn't matter to her. It was an eye-opening realization for a kid who'd spent his life being second-best.

Yesterday, Mrs. Blakely's attitude hadn't surprised him, although he'd hoped people in such a big city would have been more open-minded. Nope, he knew what he was, and knew how people thought of him. It was just a fact of life, and the bigotry he ran into didn't shock him anymore.

Of course, in Cheyenne, he was able to prove that he was as good a man as any. There'd been a few years, especially in that time right after Wendy had left and he was angry at everything and everyone, where he'd used his fists to prove it. Men started to give him grudging space, and stopped the names they'd call when he walked by.

But he was determined to be on his best behavior here in the



city. And besides, Mrs. Blakely was old enough to be his mother. Actually, what little he remembered of his mother, she'd been pretty damn young when he was born, so Mrs. Blakely was quite a few years older. And set in her ways. *She'd* never had to worry about going hungry, or selling herself to stay alive, and would have been horrified at the mere thought. But Nate came from a different world; a harsher world. So he figured there was no use talking to someone like her, or trying to defend himself. She wasn't going to admit that he was a man, same as anyone else, no matter the color of his skin.

He stopped in front of their house. Hands shoved into the pockets of his duster, he tilted his head back to gaze at the mansion. It was bigger than anything he could remember seeing in Cheyenne, even on Millionaires' Row, and there were a dozen like it along this street alone. There were fancy carved swirls and angels or something all along the eaves, and statues in the front behind the wrought-iron fence. It looked like an illustration from one of Annie's fairy tales, and it was hard to believe that this perfection housed such intolerance. Shaking his head, Nate continued on to the alley that cut towards the rear of the houses.

Emerging into a sort of back street that all the mansions' rears seemed to line, he saw the bustle he'd expected to see around front. Apparently in the city, rich people left all the *work* for the back door. Here the snow was rutted and muddy from delivery trucks and heavy boots, and here there was all the activity he hadn't seen on Pratte Avenue. Men were lifting bags and bins, women were calling instructions, and he even saw a kid or two, bundled up against the cold, darting among the wagons with their own little sacks or letters.

It wasn't too hard to figure out which one was the Blakelys' house, and he tipped his hat politely to the large woman standing on the back stoop, her fists on her ample hips as she supervised a delivery from a milk-cart. "Good morning, ma'am."

"What do you want?" She hadn't given him a second look, and Nate didn't know if that was because his skin color didn't matter to her, or if she was just too busy to notice.

"I'm here to see Wendy Murray. She's expecting me."

That earned another glance, and then a third, more thorough look. Nate resisted the urge to shift uncomfortably under her gaze. "Is she now?" A sniff, and then a shrug. "Alright. Hey! If you break those, you clumsy oaf, you'll owe me *eight* bottles!" The last had been shouted at the delivery man, and she grabbed the bin from him with a *harrumph*. Turning another calculating stare on Nate, she finally nodded. "Wait here. I don't need anyone else tracking mud into my nice clean kitchen."

Nate didn't say anything, but held the door for her while she

manhandled the bin of milk bottles into the house. She seemed surprised, but kicked the doors shut behind her nonetheless. He was left standing on the stoop, like an errant boy.

But before he had a chance to decide if it was worth knocking, the door flew open, and Wendy stood there, breathless. Had she been waiting for him? Had she rushed to the door? That was what it looked like.

She was wearing a bright blue coat that hugged all the right curves, and buttoned down over her full skirt. A muff and matching bonnet dangled from her right hand. There were spots of color high on each cheek, and her eyes were sparkling. And that hair style; he'd never seen a woman with hair so short, barely covering her ears. It was curlier now than when it had been long, and poofier, and Nate liked it. He wanted to touch it, to touch *her*... but he didn't move.

Instead, he realized that she'd been staring at him, and slowly, his lips quirked. His grin grew as her expression turned to one of surprise. And then—thank God!—she smiled back. It was a shy smile, not the kind he remembered her bestowing on him, but still... it would do for now.

“Hi, Wendy.”

“Hi, Nate.”

And just like that, they were kids again. He offered her his arm, awkwardly, like a boy playing grown-up, and she took it just as hesitantly. But then he helped her down the steps, and they turned up the street, and in negotiating the obstacles around them they grew comfortable with one another.

Turning down another alley and emerging onto the much calmer Caroline Street., Nate heard her give a little sigh. Of relief? Of relaxation? He glanced at her, noting her pink cheeks and the excitement in her eyes. She let go of his arm long enough to slip that blue bonnet over her curls, but quickly latched on again. Nate told himself it was because she was afraid of slipping on the slush, not that she wanted to touch him. Still, he grinned.

“Well? Where to?”

“You don't have any ideas?”

“Me? I just got here. I don't know anything about the city. Where do you usually go on your days off?”

She shrugged. “Truthfully, nowhere too exciting. Sometimes church. Sometimes shopping. There are a few museums that are interesting. Usually, just anything to get out of the house.”

He almost asked her why she was so desperate to leave the Blakely house, but decided that if the rest of the family was anything like the matriarch, he could guess. “Alright.” Concentrating on leading her around a big pile of shoveled snow, he asked, “Well, it's a nice

day, and the snow's stopped, so let's go enjoy it."

She didn't have to think long. "Can I assume that you don't mind being outdoors?"

His lips quirked slightly. "Yeah, you can assume that."

"Usually I walk around St. Vincent's Cemetery, or Lafayette Square." She nodded back towards Park Avenue. "But since we have the entire day, let's go see Tower Grove Park. It probably won't take the whole day, but..."

It sounded like she was babbling. Nate wondered if she was nervous. "Fine by me." He made an outrageous bow that made her chuckle. "Lead the way, Miss Murray."

She was still smiling when she turned them back towards Park Avenue, and they strolled past the mansions of the wealthy. She pointed out various houses and landmarks, and Nate was surprised to find that he really *was* interested in her world. It was so different from what he was used to, and while it made him feel as trapped as Cheyenne did, it was a fascinating trap. The buildings were taller, and the surroundings more elegant, than in Cheyenne. But he missed the wide open spaces of the ranch. He wondered if Wendy ever thought of Wyoming, or if she was so happy to be back in a city that she'd forgotten about the beauty of the rolling hills.

Walking with her beside him made him feel... complete, but also awkward. She was so at home here, among these mansions and elegance. He'd always felt different, like he was standing out, because of his skin-color; but it was even more noticeable here in the city. People were staring at them, probably wondering what a scruffy Indian cowboy was doing escorting such a fine lady around. He'd never been one to care what others thought of him, not really, but he made a note to go find a tailor and see about getting one of those fancy suits all the men wore. If he was going to be here in the city for a while, it'd be better to fit in. Also, he figured Wendy would get a kick out of seeing him looking so dandified.

They boarded a street car on Park, and turned south on Grand Avenue. Wendy said it was the old city limits, but it looked to Nate like there was still plenty of city on the other side. He helped her down at Tower Grove Park, and wished that neither of them were wearing gloves, so he could feel the warmth of her skin as she gripped his hand.

Their eyes met briefly there, by the archway, and he stopped breathing, just for a moment. *Good Lord*, she was beautiful.

She was the one to break the spell, pulling her hand away from his and shoving it into her muff. The smile she plastered on her face was brittle and fake. "Shall we?" She tilted her head through the archway, and he couldn't help that his nod was curt at the moment

being lost.

Wendy was the one who kept the conversation going, as they strolled through what he supposed was a nice enough garden. She brought up amusing experiences from their years together in Wyoming, and he recognized it for the olive branch that it was, and started to participate. Soon they were both reminiscing and chuckling as the strolled down the muddy gravel paths.

The park was pristine, all carefully manicured lawns and shaped bushes that had faded to white blobs under the snow. There were even a few frozen-over ponds, with some brave kids ice-skating on them. The dead of winter probably wasn't the best time to appreciate the landscaping that had gone into it, but it was nice to be there, with her. Nate mentioned that it was the sort of place that Serena and Sebastian would like to see, and Wendy agreed. Nate knew that she'd never met Sebastian, but was sure she'd heard all about him from her best friend. After all, she'd kept writing to *Serena* all this time. So he steered the conversation in that direction.

"Sebastian's family is pretty wealthy, you know. I mean, he's fitting in alright out in Cheyenne, which isn't that rough anymore. But he'd be right at home someplace like this."

"Oh? He likes parks, then, does he?" There was a teasing lilt to her voice that made Nate smile.

"Not that I know of. But he likes... order. And neatness." Nate looked around, taking in the symmetry of the paths and plants. "This is the sort of place that would appeal to him."

"Well," She grabbed his forearm and pulled him off along another path. "The flowers are all dead and the shrubs are covered. I didn't bring you here to see them. My favorite part of the park—and the reason I think Serena would like it—is down this way."

Up until then, Nate had sensed an underlying tension in her words, in the way she interacted with him. Like she felt awkward, but was trying to hide it. Her reminiscences were a bit too fond, her laughter a bit too forced. But now, her face relaxed into a genuine smile, and he liked the way the excitement lit those dark blue eyes. *Here* was the Wendy he remembered.

His heart tightened at the realization.

"This is the music pavilion. I've attended a few performances here during the warmer months, on my days off." Her hand slid down his arm until she was gripping his again, pulling him along. "And this..." she drew him to a halt in front of a larger-than-life statue of a man in old-fashioned clothes up on a pedestal. Or a plinth. Nate wasn't sure if there was a difference.

"This is Miller's Shakespeare." Wendy was breathless, like she was sharing a great treasure with him. He glanced at her, and saw the

hope there plain on her face. Hope for what? That he'd appreciate a statue? Nate looked back at the figure.

Raising his brows, and hoping he sounded sufficiently impressed, Nate nodded. "He sure is big. Think he was that tall in real life?"

She burst into laughter then, and he smiled in response. "I know you probably don't care as much as I do." She sighed and turned back to the statue, craning her head back to stare up at the snow that covered the author's head and shoulders. "But he's my absolute favorite thing in St. Louis. Sometimes—" she glanced at him and hesitated, as if revealing a secret, "Sometimes I come out here and talk things over with him."

"Is he a good listener?"

She chuckled again, and Nate smiled in response. "Yes, but he doesn't give very good advice." She sighed happily. "But he's the only one in this whole city who lets me talk and complain."

"Your friends don't?"

Her smile faded and her shoulders slumped, but she didn't take her gaze away from Shakespeare's face. "I don't have any friends here, Nate." She swallowed, and he wondered what it must have cost to admit that. "I have acquaintances, from my time at the High School, and with the Mulligans, but none that I would feel comfortable ranting to."

Nate didn't react, but it was hard. What kind of life had she led, then, for the past three years? He'd thought that they'd been friends, and he *knew* that she'd been friends with Serena. But to come out here, and not have that closeness with anyone... it must have been hard. Isolating. No wonder she kept writing to Serena, even if she'd cut him out of her life.

*Why* had she cut him out?

"I'm sorry, Wendy."

That too-bright smile was back when she turned to him. "Why should you be? I made my bed, and now I sleep in it." She glanced back at the statue. "Besides, Mr. Shakespeare listens when I need a friendly ear."

Placing her hand on his arm again—he swore he could feel a tingle through her gloves and his duster—she turned him around to stroll towards another clearing. "This is Miller's Alexander von Humbolt."

Nate dutifully halted before a near-identical statue to Shakespeare. While he knew who the great English playwright was, having read some of his works with Wendy years ago, he couldn't guess who this guy was supposed to be. Luckily, Humbolt apparently mattered less to her, because they didn't linger, but strolled back

towards the music pavilion.

Wendy waved at the busts in the clearing on either side, where other promenading couples were halted, admiring the marble carvings. "That's Mozart. That's Rossini. And I've heard that Miller is working on a Beethoven." Nate nodded, as if he had any idea who she was talking about.

Their earlier ease had been broken, and now they walked in awkward silence. He wondered what she was thinking about, if she was regretting such a revealing comment about her life. He wondered *why* she'd lived with such loneliness, when she had family and friends who missed her back home.

When they reached the edge of the park, Wendy took a deep breath. "Are you ready to return?"

"Are you nuts?" Her surprised look made him grin. "I've been thinking about getting you alone for... well, for years. And you've got the whole day off. I'm not returning you to Mrs. Blakely 'til it's dark."

"Oh." Yeah, he was pretty sure that was a pleased blush and smile. If he hadn't been looking right at her, he might have missed the flicker of blue as she glanced his way behind her spectacles. "I'm not ready either. I've..." she swallowed, and raised her eyes to his.

He fell.

He fell into her eyes, he fell in love. He fell in love with the loneliness and the vulnerability and the quiet strength and the hope that he saw in those deep pools of blue. He felt his chest seize, and didn't know what to say. Didn't know if he could compress years of longing and desire into something simple and pithy enough to impress an author. So he just held his breath.

"...I've missed you. Missed spending time with you." Her voice was a whisper, but Nate felt the admission clear down to his soul.

He placed his free hand over hers where it rested on his forearm, and then slid it down until he could twine his fingers through hers. A sense of peace slipped over him. This was the way things should be. "I've missed you too, Wendy."

She smiled, her old smile, the real one. The smile of understanding and teasing and a hint of exasperation that she'd used to bestow on only him. It made him want to kiss her, right there in the middle of the cold park.

Then she blinked, and the new Wendy was back, the Wendy that belonged here in this big city. "I'm hungry. How about you?" He just nodded, and she led him towards a vendor who had a shelter set up around some benches and a cheery firepit. They sat side-by-side and traded tastes and jokes about childhood meals and adventures.

Later, they took the streetcar back towards the city center to a museum Wendy described as "interesting," if under-visited. The

portraits and dioramas didn't hold Nate's attention nearly as well as the route through the industrial section of town had. He'd made a note to visit again, just so he could ask about all of those smokestacks and turbines. The exhibits in the museum were all historical, and it was just another indication of how different he and Wendy had become. But he noticed that she wasn't as intrigued as she pretended. Thankfully, there were few people visiting that day, and even fewer as they made their way out of the hall of paintings.

They'd left their coats and hats with an attendant at the front, and Nate watched from the corner of his eye as she worried the exhibit map between her hands. She was always so strong and composed that it was odd to see her so distressed. But then, she used to only show her worries and fear to him. It had pleased him that she'd trusted him enough to show him her true feelings.

Stopping in front of a stuffed mountain lion perched on a fake fallen tree—Nate had a hard time being impressed when he'd seen the real thing—he gave up his secret glances and turned towards her, admiring her profile.

She pretended to ignore him.

He wondered what she was thinking. Wondered why her breathing had gotten shallower. Wondered why she was suddenly wringing her hands, instead of just worrying the paper. Wondered if her shoulders could get any straighter, or her jaw any tighter.

"Wendy...?"

She turned to him, and he cringed at the confusion and fear in those eyes. "Why are you here, Nate?" She took a deep breath. "Why did you come?"

And the words that he'd been preparing, the lies that he'd carefully considered on those long hours on the train, were lost.



Frankly, Wendy was impressed that she'd managed to reign in her tears. They were still there, threatening to overflow, but she thought she'd done a good enough job of blinking them back so that Nate wouldn't see them.

But nothing could have held back those words. The question she'd wanted to ask since he'd first arrived on the Blakelys' doorstep. Being with him, today, had made the question impossible to ignore.

Today, she'd seen the way things had been; the way things could have been. Nate was a wonderful man—strong and caring and thoughtful, not to mention so beautiful he made her ache—and a good

friend. She'd been lucky to call him 'hers' for a short time, and he deserved someone so much better than herself.

Being with him had been beautiful torture. Laughing, reminiscing with him, and being reminded of how much she enjoyed his company, his touch... The experience had made her simultaneously thrilled and devastated. He—his company—made her feel like she could fly, all giddy and bubbly and breathless. But knowing that she couldn't have him, that she couldn't do that to him, that she didn't even deserve to be spending so much time enjoying his company... that had been painful.

The whole experience had been painful. Standing beside him, wanting him, wanting what he could give her and make her feel, but knowing she couldn't.

It was a miracle she hadn't broken down into tears earlier, but she knew that she was sturdier than that. When she'd lived in Cheyenne, Nate had been the only one who knew that she didn't possess the self-control she pretended. She wondered if he was able to see through her carefully-constructed façade even now.

And now that she'd asked the question, she couldn't turn away. She couldn't hide her reaction from him, because she needed to be looking into his gorgeous eyes when he explained.

Because she was, she saw the hesitation, the lie forming. And he saw that she saw, because his expression carefully neutral, he gestured to the stupid stuffed mountain lion. "Coming here was your idea, Wendy."

She narrowed her eyes at him, saw the muscles along his jaw harden. They held each other's gaze for a long moment. He had the most remarkable eyes; a mossy color ringed in brown that Molly had always called hazel, but Wendy knew was green. A beautiful green that blinked now and looked away.

Even as kids she'd been able to tell when he'd been about to lie.

"The truth, please. You owe me that."

"I owe...?"

He turned away in frustration, and faced the gray wall. Wendy wondered what he was really seeing.

"Nate?"

"Shit." The whispered curse was followed by a few others she pretended not to hear, as he ran one brown hand through his hair. His hair that now hung past his nape, much longer than hers. The hair that she knew was silky and soft as a black cloud, and that she itched to touch even now. The way she used to scratch his head while he listened to her read aloud, half-asleep on her lap in front of the winter fire, a small smile on those beautiful lips.

Oh God, she missed those days. Missed the way she could touch



him casually, and have him touch her, and not ache with remorse.

Missed him.

"Please, Nate." Her voice caught on her whisper, and she wasn't even sure he heard it.

"Because we all missed you, Wendy. Molls knew something was wrong, so Ash volunteered me to come find out. You still write to your sisters and Serena, but even *they'd* figured out you were hiding something." His back was still to her, so he thankfully missed her wince. "So I came to find out what it was." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Came to bring you home."

She didn't have a response. Couldn't say *You made the trip for nothing*. Couldn't say *Things can never go back the way they were*.

She contented herself with just "I'm sorry."

It wasn't enough. He whirled back to her then, and she saw the man he rarely showed anyone anymore. The fighter. The bundle of lean, coiled muscles. The little bit of wild Indian she'd always melted for.

"What is it, Wendy? What are you hiding? *Why* are you hiding?"

She could never tell him. Couldn't stand to lose his friendship—what little remained for her— or his admiration. So she forced a smile that must have looked as brittle as she felt. "Nothing."

He stepped closer. They stood almost nose-to-nose; she wasn't as tall as Molly, but tall enough to feel his breath on her lips. She swallowed, and tried not to focus on his eyes, so close. Instead, she cataloged the rest of his face, his smooth skin marred by new scars. Where had that pale white one under his eye come from? What had the last few years been like for him?

He whispered her name, and she felt her breath hitch. Felt his voice clear down into the pit of her stomach.

"Why'd you leave me?"

The question sounded like it had been wrenched from him, and her heart tightened at the pain in his voice. She could no more ignore it than she could stop living. She swallowed.

"I told you why. And then my letters..."

"No. I know why you came to St. Louis. I think." He lowered his brows in frustration, and hurt, and she felt like the lowest kind of bug, to put him through that. "Why'd you cut me off? Why'd you stop writing to me? I thought we were friends."

She might have been able to lie to him, had it not been for that last whispered confession. She owed him at least part of the truth. No, she owed him *all* of the truth, but couldn't force herself to give it to him. Couldn't stand the thought of watching his regard for her fade from those beautiful eyes...

She lifted one hand to his cheek, pleased that she'd left her gloves with her coat. She could finally touch him, feel his smooth skin beneath her fingertips. She used to tease him about not being able to grow a beard, but she'd always loved the feel of his skin.

He shuddered and closed his eyes, and Wendy wondered if he was remembering other touches. Other times. Other easy moments together, lost to the past.

She swallowed. "Because... because you deserve to be happy. And you couldn't be happy with someone like me." Mossy green eyes flashed open, and she saw the disbelief. She hastened to explain. "I know that we were just friends, but you deserve to find love with someone. Someone better than me. More worthy." Now it was her turn to squeeze her eyes shut, hoping he hadn't seen the tears threatening again. "You deserve love and a wife and a family and a home. And I can't..." she swallowed again, forcing the words past a stricken throat. "I can't give you that."

"Let me get this straight." He took her hand in his, and stepped back, so that she could see more of him when she peeked in his direction. She could breathe again. "You didn't cut me out of your life... you cut yourself out of *my* life?" She thought she might have nodded. "Because *you* decided it was a good idea? Because *you* thought *you* weren't worthy...?"

She risked looking at him then. The anger was gone from his eyes. Now his expression was carefully blank, and if she hadn't known him so well—*used* to know him so well—she would have missed the confusion in his gaze.

"...worthy of *me*?"

Oh God, he sounded so lost, it was nearly her undoing. After all these years, he still didn't understand that he was a good man, worthy of happiness.

How to explain? How to convince him? "Nate, I..." He blinked, and the lost-boy look was gone, replaced by something akin to determination.

"Shut up," he growled, as he used his grip on her hand to pull her closer. What was he...?

And then she stopped thinking, because he was kissing her.

Eight years. She'd known him for eight years. And not a day had passed that she hadn't thought about kissing him. Sometimes wishfully, sometimes with detached curiosity, wondering what he would taste like. Eight years of wondering how it would feel to be kissed back, to feel him beneath her skin and breathe the same breath as him.

It was better than she could have possibly imagined.

The same muscles that she'd admired years ago when he'd race

shirtless across the hills after a mustang now held her enthralled. Tightly corded arms wrapped around her, pulling her against a chest that she shouldn't be thinking about.

And the kiss. *Dear Lord* the kiss. She felt it to her toes, and down each arm and out to each finger that wrapped around the flannel of his shirt to stay upright. This was *Nate*. This was the kiss she'd been imagining for years. And it was nothing like she could have imagined.

Despite how gentle he'd always been to her, she'd been able to see the passion, the frustration that simmered right below the surface. It had come out when he'd wrestled wild horses, beautifully wild himself. But *now...* *Oh God* now that passion came close to overwhelming her.

She should have been scared, overcome by his power. But instead, she wanted to pull him closer, to demand *more*. The *more* that she knew she could never have again, despite being sure that his man was unlike any other. She wanted all of his touch, all of his self.

All of him.

All of his love.

With that thought, she was able to push herself away. It took every last bit of willpower, and left her feeling like an oyster she'd once eaten—naked and weak and wiggly. She gasped, and then gasped again, trying to decide if she was mortified at the thought of kissing him in a museum where anyone could have seen them, or at the realization that she wanted nothing more than to go back into his arms to do it again.

She couldn't. She couldn't do it to him.

It was bad enough that he'd come, and had spent a beautiful day with her. It was bad enough to be reminded of all that she'd lost, lost for both of them. It was bad enough to see how badly he'd been hurt. By her.

But now she knew what it felt like to be kissed by him. To kiss him back. She knew, and that knowing made what she had to do even harder. That kiss had made her dream impossible dreams about the way things could have been. Things that couldn't be because of her stupidity, of her self-centered refusal to admit that she might *not* know best.

Suddenly, she couldn't stand the loss. Whereas minutes before his nearness had made her stomach turn over in anticipation, now it clenched in sorrow. She was going to be sick.

Backing away, trying not to see his frustrated expression and the desire behind those eyes, she raised her hand to her lips. Felt the warmth and delicious bruising he'd caused.

"Excuse me." She tried to say more, but the words caught in

her throat. She turned and fled the room then, leaving him standing there.

Alone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



*Damn.* She'd left him. She'd gone all soft against him, and then ran off and left him, before he'd had a chance to put words to all of his thoughts. Before he'd had the chance to tell her what he was feeling.

Exactly like when she'd left him in Cheyenne.

That kiss, though. That kiss had been something else. He was glad that she'd been the one to push away, to break it off...because he didn't think that he could have ended it. As it was, her desertion had given him the time he'd needed to get his raging arousal under control, by taking deep breaths and thinking about snow and ice and other extremely cold things. It didn't do a lot of good. He'd found a bench in an out-of-the-way corner—not that there were many people in all of the museum, a small favor he was thankful for—and let his head fall back against the smooth stone.

It took quite a while before he figured he could face her again, without grabbing her and kissing the daylight out of her. Again. By that time, he figured she should have been composed too. He had a vague plan of taking her out to dinner before returning her to the Blakely house. He figured he could handle it, as long as they sat on opposite sides of the table. And he tried not to look into those amazing eyes of hers. And he thought about blizzards and snowbanks and whatnot.

When another ten minutes had passed, and she still hadn't returned, Nate gave up waiting. He was making his way towards the women's washroom—not that he had any idea what to do once he got there—when a horrible suspicion entered his mind, and he detoured to the front of the museum. Sure enough, her coat, hat and muff were gone from the attendant's room.

"The young lady with the blue coat; when did she leave?"

The skinny little man behind the counter looked down his nose at Nate—which was impressive, considering Nate stood half a head taller—and sneered slightly. "Almost a half-hour ago, *sir*."

Despite his disdain, Nate tipped the man for his duster and hat. He'd discovered long ago that being rude to people who scorned him for his skin color just confirmed their opinion.

Of course there was no sign of Wendy out on the street, but the streetcar track told him that she could have easily escaped back to the Blakelys'. She was independent enough, stubborn enough, to go alone. That realization didn't stop him from cursing and kicking a snowbank in frustration... a move he regretted when he had to ride back to the boardinghouse with a wet pant leg.

He decided against going to the Blakelys' house. He didn't know if he could face her again so soon after that kiss, and he wanted to have some time to think about what she'd told him. About that ridiculous idea that *she* wasn't worthy of *him*, for some reason.

For his entire life, Nate had known that he was less than the people around him, because of his Indian blood. It was something he just lived with, had grown to accept. When he'd been younger, he'd complained to Ash—there hadn't been anyone to listen to him before Ash had adopted him—that it wasn't fair. He only had one Indian grandparent, but he looked the way he did. Ash had just shrugged, and rumbled his hair, and told him that life wasn't fair.

Nate smiled grimly. His big brother was right. If life were fair, he wouldn't be sitting by himself, nursing a whiskey and thinking about the way she'd walked out on him again.

"Penny for your thoughts, sugar?"

Mrs. Gardner swept into the darkened parlor, and began to poke the embers of the fireplace back to life. She threw another log on the fire, and then, satisfied with the cheery blaze, turned to him, wiping her hands on her apron.

When she realized he hadn't answered, she narrowed her eyes at him. "I said—"

"I heard you, ma'am." Nate took another drink. "Just trying to decide if they're worth a penny."

"Oh, don't be so moepy, honey. Go on and tell Big Liz what's wrong." She winked at him, and pouring herself a glass of the whiskey, sat in the wingback chair beside his.

Ash had always teased him about the way older women seemed to find Nate irresistible. Nate couldn't argue; he was confounded himself. Between the Selkirk sisters' coy banter, Eve's decadent possessiveness, and "Big Liz" Gardner's flirtation, he seemed like a magnet for well-meaning older ladies. Of course, Mrs. Gardner was a bit older than most. Still, from the moment he'd taken a room at her boardinghouse, she'd laid claim to him.

"Just thinking."

"Let me guess." She sat back and gave him a calculating stare, and he was a disconcerted at her attention. "It's about a woman. You don't understand her."

Nate narrowed his eyes. Mrs. Gardner was still beautiful, even

after a lifetime of hard work, but there was no way she could have known that about him. Was there? “How’d you figure that?”

Her bark of laughter was more of a guffaw, with none of Eve’s tinkling falseness. “Because, honey, the only reason a man drinks alone is a woman. And there’s not a man alive who really understands us.” She threw back the whiskey, and poured herself more. It came from her liquor cabinet, after all. She stared at the bottle for a moment, lost in thought. “But for some reason, you keep marrying us.”

“You were married.”

She blinked, and tossed him a smile that wrinkled the skin around her eyes. “Two and a half times, darlin’!”

“And a half?”

“Well, that last time he didn’t really do right by me, did he? But after almost twenty-five years with Mr. Gardner, I didn’t need another husband.”

Nate couldn’t help but be drawn to the woman’s frankness. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Another laugh. “Don’t be! He’s still alive and kicking, out in that God-blessed land of Utah.” She smiled down at the liquor in her glass. “He and the rest of those Mormons didn’t really approve of my lifestyle, and he never gave me any kids.” She shrugged and took another drink. “Not from lack of trying, which I figure means it’s my fault. So I gave them all a fond farewell, and headed south with someone new. Then when he died, I came back this way—I was born and raised here, you know—to open this place. I like it, because after half a lifetime in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a bunch of other wives and their kids, it’s nice to meet new and interesting people.” She reached across the small table between them, and patted Nate’s leg. “And here I don’t have to share.”

The twinkle in her eye caused Nate to burst into laughter. It felt good. He saluted her with his glass, and she smiled in response.

“Now that I’ve dragged you from your melancholy, tell me what’s troubling you. Maybe I can help.” She winked. “I *have* had quite a lot of experience, you know.”

He smiled, the laughter having eased some of the tightness in his chest. “I told you I was here to try to fetch my sister-in-law home.”

“Back to Wyoming?”

“Yeah.”

“But that’s not the whole truth, is it?”

The woman must really know a lot about human nature. Or be a good guesser. “No.” He sighed, and took another sip of the whiskey, liking the way it burned on the way down. “No, and she’s my sister-in-law’s sister, really. We grew up together, I’ve known her for years.

And somewhere along the way, I went and fell in love with her.”

“Ah. But she’s here in St. Louis, and now you are too.”

“She quit writing home. All of us have been worried about her. And I...”

When he didn’t finish, Mrs. Gardner did. “And you missed her terribly, didn’t you?” Nate didn’t have to answer; she patted his knee again. “Love isn’t always easy. You came to find out why she stopped writing to you, and if she loved you back?”

“I came to figure out if she’d ever even *considered* loving me.”

He couldn’t help the scorn that laced his words. Hearing it, he took another drink, and wondered if he was trying to get drunk. Drunk enough to forget the taste of her and the way she’d run afterwards.

“You don’t think that’s likely?”

“Look at me, Mrs. Gardner.”

“I am looking, sugar. You’re a fine-looking man.”

“I’m an Indian.” He spat out the word like it was a curse.

Maybe it was. Maybe if he’d been a different man, Wendy would have stayed in Wyoming. Wouldn’t have left him... twice.

“Not with those eyes, you’re not. I’m guessing you’re only half-Indian. Am I right?”

“Quarter.”

She peered at him, and Nate was suddenly glad for the shadows the fire threw. “Really? Your father wasn’t...?”

The thought wrenched a burst of ironic laughter from him.

Unlike earlier, though, it didn’t make him feel better. Maybe she was right. He hadn’t known his father; maybe the man *was* an Indian. Wouldn’t that be just peachy, to find out that he was actually three-quarters Indian? He jerked his shoulders and tried to tamp down on the rise of bubbling dread in his stomach.

“I’m sorry, Nate.”

“Don’t be, ma’am. I never knew my father. Just had my mother’s claim that he was an Irishman. Could’ve been anyone.”

She didn’t say anything, but after a long moment poured more whiskey into his glass. Downing it, Nate wondered if she was trying to get him drunk. Wondered if he cared.

“So...” Mrs. Gardner refilled her own glass. “Judging from the way you spit out the word earlier, you think that she doesn’t love you because you’ve got mixed blood.” She didn’t wait for a response, which was good, because Nate couldn’t bring himself to agree aloud. “But you said you’ve known her for a while, and even though I just met you, I think you’re smart. Too smart to fall in love with someone so close-minded as to judge a man by his skin.”

He toasted her ironically, appreciating her faith but not confident in it.



She *tut-tutted* him in response. "I'm right, you know. I have a lot of experience in love." She looked down at the whiskey in her glass, and Nate could tell from the faraway look in her eyes that she wasn't really seeing it. "And experience *not* being in love, just being comfortable and afraid that nothing better is going to come along."

She blinked, and looked up at him again. "But one thing I've learned, Nate, is that it's better to be happy than comfortable and safe. If you're happy, you can work to be successful. If you're successful and comfortable, but not happy in your life, then it's never going to get any better. No matter how hard you wish it." She sighed. "Trust me on this. I lived twenty-five years as the wife of a respected man, but never quite content. I married him because I was tired of scrabbling, and I liked the idea of being taken care of. I stayed with him because I was afraid of what would happen to me if I left. Then I stayed longer because I had to take care of another wife's kids after she died. I realized that I wasn't happy, and I wasn't going to become happy, staying there... so I left." She took a long drink, and smacked her lips. "And I'd be lying if I said it's been easy. I've worked hard to get to this point. But I'm happy."

Her expectant look told him that he was supposed to say something. "Well, I'm glad you're happy."

She laughed at that. "It's kind of you to let an old woman ramble on like that. But I mean it, Nate. Don't settle for something comfortable, when you could push yourself to find something that makes you happy."

"Sorry, ma'am. I don't follow." Hell, he was getting drunk, wasn't he?

"This sister-in-law's sister of yours is comfortable and safe and you think you love her." Nate opened his mouth to tell her that he *did* love Wendy, but she interrupted him. "Okay, you *do* love her. But maybe you only love her because you know her, because she's been there."

"But she hasn't been there."

"In the time she's been gone, have you thought about other women? Have you been pining over her, or did you go out and meet other women? Think about the way other women made you feel?"

"Yeah. I did."

She hadn't been expecting that answer. Her brows went up. "Really? And how did they make you feel? Compared to her? What's her name, anyhow?"

"Wendy." Nate shifted forward, his elbows on his knees, the whiskey in his hands. He stared at the fire. "And other women... they're just not *her*. She knows me, the real me. The others didn't seem to care to find out about the real me. I was just some Indian to

them, for better or worse. And they all seemed so *fake*. Wendy... Wendy's *real*."

"You're not just talking about whores here, are you?"

He grinned. "Well, not *all* whores, ma'am." She chuckled lightly. "Wendy's best friend lives in Cheyenne, and keeps inviting me to all of these events to meet people. The women there are all interested in marriage, but none of them are particularly interested in *me*... or interesting enough to interest me. You know?" *Getting drunk?* Shit, he *was* drunk.

Still chuckling, she took another sip. "I think I do, Nate. I think I do. And..." she saluted him with her glass, "And I think that you might be right about her. Sounds like you've got it bad for this Wendy. But how does she feel about you?"

Nate flopped back in the chair, his breath exploding from him. That was the real question, wasn't it? "When she quit writing, I figured I didn't mean anything to her. But then today..."

"Tell me."

So he did. He sat there in her parlor, with the cheery fire and the soft snow falling outside dark windows, and the too-good whiskey on the small table between them, and told her everything about the day. About how being with Wendy had been like old times, and how much fun they'd both had. About the way she'd touched him, and then confounded him with that claim she'd cut herself out of his life because she wasn't worthy of him. About that kiss, that incredible kiss that he'd been dreaming about for years, and that still made him hot to think about. About the way she'd left him.

Mrs. Gardner just sat and listened, nodding sometimes, other times staring out the window. When he was done, she was quiet for a moment and then, turning eyes bright with tears on him, smiled. "Ma'am?"

"I think you're right, sugar. You've spent three years missing the woman, and I'm glad you've come after her. You love her, and it sounds like she needs you."

"Are you...?"

She blinked, and smiled again. "I'm fine. I was just remembering... and you're a sweetheart, Nate. If I was thirty years younger..."

He managed not to roll his eyes. What *was* it with old ladies?

She noticed, and laughed. "I mean it, you know. Any woman would be pleased to have you court her. But sounds like your heart is already taken, and unless your Wendy is the world's best actress, she's still feeling something powerful for you. It's a good thing you're here to figure that out."

Deliberately, Nate put the glass down on the table, and waved

her away when she went to pour him more. He'd had enough. "So what do I do? She ran off. She ran off from me in Cheyenne three years ago, and she ran off from me today. You don't think that sounds like a woman who wants to be free of me?"

"No, I think that sounds like a woman who isn't sure of her own mind. Like she's hiding something, or isn't sure what she wants. But," she pointed at his chest with her glass, "she wants you. I guarantee that."

"How can you be so sure?"

"She kissed you back, didn't she? In public? You said—you said it!—that she 'melted'. Oh yeah, she wants you. Besides, honey," Mrs. Gardner patted his knee again, "you're a fine man, and she'd be a fool not to want you."

He still wasn't sure he believed her. "So what do I *do*?"

"You said she's a private tutor? She probably is free by dinner time. Send a note to her and tell her you'll be by to pick her up for dinner on, oh, Wednesday. That'll give her a few days to think about what happened and what she really wants. Then take her out someplace nice and use all of that charm."

"Wh' charm?"

The way she smiled at him told Nate that he was missing parts of the conversation. *Damn*. Why'd he only drink when he thought about Wendy?

"For now, though, you're not fit to hold a pen, much less compose an invitation. Write her tomorrow." Mrs. Gardner stood up, smoothing her skirts and offering him a hand up, which he gladly accepted. "I'd best be putting you to bed, young man, if you expect to be able to stand tomorrow."

Hell, he wasn't as drunk as all that. Pulling his hand free from hers, he affected a decent bow, which made her laugh again. Then with all the dignity he could muster, he carefully said goodnight and climbed the stairs, thinking about what she'd said.

Later, lying in the small bed with his hands stacked behind his head, Nate listened to the gentle sound of flakes falling on snow outside his window. Maybe it was the whiskey talking, but the sound reminded him of home, and made him feel safe. Like he was under a thick blanket or something.

What would Wendy say when she got the invitation? Would she accept? Would it matter? Nate *was* going to see her again, and if she didn't agree to dinner, he'd just show up in the Blakelys' foyer again.

He and Wendy belonged together. That kiss had proved it, and he'd do anything he could to convince her of that.



"You look wan, Miss Murray. I do hope you're not ill."

Wendy smiled tightly, sure that Mrs. Blakely's concern had absolutely nothing to do with her son's tutor's health. "I'm fine, thank you. I just slept poorly last night and am rather tired."

'Slept poorly' was an understatement; Wendy didn't think she'd slept at all. She'd tossed and turned all night, listening to the gentle hiss of falling snow outside her third-floor window. It reminded her of home, of the mornings she'd woken *knowing* there was a fresh blanket of snowfall just from the sounds of the night.

The memories confused her. The city was her home; she'd been born and raised in Chicago, and spent the last three years here in St. Louis. The few short years she'd lived in Wyoming shouldn't have mattered enough to call it 'home'. But somehow, they had, and she had lately found herself getting terribly homesick for Cheyenne.

Last night was no different. She missed her sisters, missed Serena, missed her nephews, wanted to meet her niece. She even missed Ash and the horses. But most of all, she'd missed Nate. And now he was here, *here* with her, and she'd spent a beautiful, amazing day with him, and shared that beautiful, amazing kiss.

The kiss she didn't deserve.

It was about that time that Wendy had groaned, and moving the pillow off of her head, gotten out of bed to write. She'd written for hours, because it was better than lying in bed thinking about Nate's touch. She'd tried to write about the Count and Sophia, but kept coming back to her Hero story. She threw herself into it wholeheartedly, and enjoyed crafting new characters. Most of her heroines were strong and independent, but this one—who she still hadn't named—needed rescuing, which was why the Hero was so important. Wendy wondered what that said about her current frame of mind; *she* certainly didn't need rescuing. At least, she didn't deserve rescuing.

Mrs. Blakely's skeptic "*harrumph*" brought her back to the hall outside the nursery. "Well, just make sure that's all it is. Winter colds are the absolute worst, and God forbid you've brought the influenza into this house, after spending all day out among the populace with *who knows what*." The way she narrowed her eyes told Wendy that she meant Nate, and Wendy felt her spine stiffen in an effort to keep herself from defending him to her employer. "Jeremy absolutely *cannot* afford to get sick at this time. He is delicate, and weak—"

"I will have to disagree with you, Mrs. Blakely." Wendy hated it when the boy's mother coddled Jeremy, knowing that she was doing

him irreparable harm by treating him like an invalid. "Jeremy is as hale and hearty as any seven-year-old boy, despite his inability to hear." *And you would know that if you bothered to spend any time with your children.*

The older woman's lips thinned at the interruption, but she'd learned over the last year that Wendy could hold her own in an argument when it came to Jeremy's welfare. "Still, if he's to go off to school soon, then he can't afford to get sick now."

Wendy nodded regally, her back still stiff. "I agree entirely."

Mrs. Blakely's eyes narrowed, but she nodded imperiously as well. Then, an uneasy truce between two strong-willed women, they bid one another 'good day', and parted company.

Wendy entered the nursery, still tamping down her irritation at her employer's inability to give Jeremy the kind of credit he deserved, when she was met with the seven-year-old's exuberant greeting.

*\*Good morning, Wendy!\** She returned his hug gladly. Although she insisted on being called "Miss Murray" when they were in company—not that anyone else in the household could understand his signs, but she was trying to instill some sense of decorum in Jeremy before he left for school—she allowed him to call her "Wendy" in private. He saw it as a kind of quiet conspiracy against propriety, which made him happy. And to Wendy, the simple rebellion made her feel like part of Jeremy's family; a trusted friend who happened to be teaching him what he needed to be successful in the wider world. Like she had Annie.

"Good morning, Jeremy." As always, she spoke aloud when she signed. Jeremy was even better at reading lips than he was at signing, and from Serena's letters, Wendy knew that it was an important skill. The school the Blakelys would send him to—she wasn't privileged to know which one they'd chosen—would almost certain be an oralist school. Oralism was all about teaching deaf students to actually *speak*, which still amazed Wendy. Her own sister Annie was apparently now speaking more often than not; to Wendy, who'd taught the girl to sign at four years old, that sounded like a miracle.

"Why are you so excited this morning? Did you have particularly good oatmeal?" It was a tradition for her to tease the boy about his breakfasts, which she knew he hated.

*\*No!\** His smile didn't need translating. *\*Did you know? My brother is coming to visit!\**

She tried not to let her alarm show in her expression. Instead, she swallowed, and pretended minor interest. "Which brother?"

*\*Steven!\**

Her heart sunk, although she wasn't surprised. Of course it would be Steven. Ellis was still in school in Chicago, but Steven

visited from Salt Lake once every other month or so at his mother's insistence. His last two visits had been nightmarish for her; both times she'd pretended illness and stayed in her room. She just couldn't stand to see his smug grin, or watch him flirt with the downstairs maid. And once he'd had the audacity to talk about inviting himself to her room later that night... well, it was a wonder she hadn't slapped him then and there, in his parents' foyer.

But she'd spent the last months pretending that she didn't hate him, and hopefully the Blakelys hadn't realized her distaste. So she tried for an interested smile, and asked Jeremy, "When is he coming?"

*\*Friday! Stephanie told me this morning. He will be here Friday.\**

Oh joy. He *had* to be coming right in the middle of her crisis with Nate, didn't he? As if her life wasn't too complicated already, with trying to figure out how to send Nate away—trying to decide if she even *wanted* to send him away—without Steven oozing his way back into it.

Well, she told herself as she settled Jeremy down for his lessons, *you'll just have to avoid him*. Actually, most of her issues could be solved if she just locked herself in her room, avoiding all men. But then she'd have to spend more time like last night, alone and thinking about Nate's touch. *How* had the man made her melt so suddenly? How had that kiss managed to be more than she'd ever imagined? More than she'd ever experienced? Thinking about Steven, she almost snorted. *Much* more.

Steven's kisses had been demanding and overpowering. He'd been interested in taking pleasure, and the pleasure he gave in return was overwhelming. Nate's kiss had been breathtaking, because he poured so much of himself into it. There was no *take* there, only giving; of himself, and his longing. It had aroused her, yes, but the emotion behind Nate's kiss had almost brought her to her knees. She'd had no idea that a man and a woman could share that much with each other.

It was almost sinful to compare the two men. Steven was tall and athletic, although going pudgy as he got used to the good life of a successful lawyer. He was suave and debonair—or at least thought he was—and knew how to make people like him. But his charming exterior hid a spoiled boy who blamed others for his shortcomings and happily used the people around him to get what he wanted. Not unlike his mother, Wendy supposed.

Nate, on the other hand, was honest and noble, and always had been. He was tall as well, but lithe and sinewy, and dark as Steven was pale. He'd spent his life thinking he was worth less than other men, and because of that he'd grown into the most worthy man she'd ever known. He was kind and generous and intelligent. So few people

got to know the *real* him, but Wendy did, and she knew that he was worth ten Stevens.

The morning went about as well as could be expected, considering that she was exhausted and worried sick over Steven's return. She'd done her best to push thoughts of Nate from her mind, but he'd pop back in when she least expected it. Carefully manipulating Jeremy's hands to form a new sign reminded her of the way Nate taught her to fish all those years ago. The sun reflecting on the snow outside reminded her of quiet winter mornings drinking coffee with him and making plans for the day.

It seemed like trying to ignore him just brought Nate to her mind even more. She'd had a wonderful day with him yesterday, before it had ended so abruptly. Part of her wanted him to go back home and leave her to wallow in her misery here in the hell her pride had created. The other part of her desperately wanted him to stay with her, to try to learn to love her despite everything. And she *knew* that was incredibly selfish, but couldn't help it. She wanted a Hero, and that galled her to admit.

She was wrung out by noon, but still had hours to go. She spent Jeremy's rest time trying to nap herself, but was unsuccessful. And then, in the late afternoon, Martin appeared at the nursery door, with a letter on a silver tray. Wendy ignored him, assuming he was there for Miss Dunn. She was trying to convince Jeremy to focus long enough to master these last few signs, and then they could go out for a walk in the snow. She was surprised, therefore, to hear Martin's polite little cough right behind her.

Turning, he presented the letter to her. She saw no alternative but to take it. He bowed slightly, and left the room as quietly as he had entered.

Although she hadn't written to him in almost a year and a half, Nate hadn't stopped writing to her. Sometimes she'd thrown out his letters without even opening them, not brave enough to read all about home and how much he missed her. Sometimes she'd poured over his news and reminisces, as a kind of penance.

His handwriting was almost as familiar as her own. And here it was, her name boldly scrawled across the note in her hands. She held it, dreading to know what was inside. Was he leaving? Or worse, was he staying? Did he think about that kiss, or had it meant nothing to him?

"A letter, Miss Murray? Whoever would be writing to you without using the post?" Of course Miss Dunn had noticed the exchange; her narrowed eyes missed little.

"Maybe it's that Indian man Mama saw her with!" Stephanie smirked at her older sister.

“Oh yes, Miss Dunn. I heard Mama tell Papa that the man was a savage. He probably doesn’t understand how to use the post.”

Wendy’s jaw had tightened to hear the two girls parrot their mother’s bigotry. But she met Miss Dunn’s eyes, and saw that she’d get no help there.

“An Indian, Miss Murray?”

It was difficult to tamp down the anger this time. *How dare she use that scornful tone!* How dare them all! But through sheer force of will, Wendy calmly placed the note in the small pocket of her skirt, and smiled tightly. “I’m sure I don’t know who wrote me, Miss Dunn. But it is hardly the time to read correspondence now.”

The nanny narrowed her eyes again—which made her look like a near-sighted vulture—and then nodded stiffly. “True. Girls, attend me, please.” And they were back to their lessons on embroidery or God knew what.

Wendy gave a sigh of relief and turned back to Jeremy, who’d been waiting about as patiently as a young boy promised a romp in the snow could wait. She smiled at him, and decided that she was done for the day as well. “Good job today, Jeremy.” He beamed proudly, still fidgeting in his chair. “What do you say we skip the rest and go for a walk?”

He was out the door before she could turn around. With as much dignity as she could muster, she followed him, and when the door closed on the girls’ quiet gossiping, she sighed. Relieved to be alone, if only for a moment, she took out Nate’s letter and pushed her eyeglasses up to the bridge of her nose.

***Dinner Wednesday?***

***I’ll pick you up.***

***Please don’t say no.***

***-N.***

*Please don’t say no.* It was what they used to say to one another when they were younger, and asking the other for a favor. Well, honestly, Wendy was usually the one who used it: “Can we go fishing today? Please don’t say no!” or “Let’s take that new horse out for a ride. Please don’t say no!” Nate would always sigh, like he had way too much to do to fritter his time away with her, but he’d finish up whatever chore he’d been engaged in, and take her wherever she asked. Every single time.

*Please don’t say no.* Of course she wouldn’t. With a phrase like that, reminding her of all the things he’d done for her over the years,



of *course* she was going to say yes. And if she was being honest with herself, dinner with Nate wasn't going to be just for his sake.

She *wanted* to see him, to spend time with him, to laugh with him like they used to. She liked being with him, and liked the way he made her feel. Certainly, her life would be easier if he'd go back to Cheyenne and leave her to her own private misery... but she didn't actually *want* that.

Sighing, she went to fetch her coat and bonnet. Perhaps an hour chasing after Jeremy in the park would help distract her from her roiling thoughts. If nothing else, it should tire her out sufficiently that she shouldn't have any trouble falling asleep later. She would be able to collapse into bed, and not think about Nate—or Steven—at all.

She snorted quietly. If only she'd be so lucky.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



*Thank God* he'd quit drinking last night; the last thing he needed was a splitting headache this morning. As it was, Mrs. Gardner had plopped his plate of fried potatoes down a little too hard this morning. He'd caught her smirk, and resisted the urge to glare back. Instead he'd eaten his breakfast—which didn't come close to Molly's—with as much dignity as he could muster, listening to the quiet chatter of the other boarders.

Afterwards, he'd cornered his hostess to ask for suggestions on clothing stores and haberdasheries. Cheyenne had gotten so big in the last ten years that he couldn't buy everything he needed at one 'general store' even out there, so he figured St. Louis would be worse. Luckily, Mrs. Gardner gave him directions and recommendations. Then he asked her for a pen and paper.

It took him three tries to get the invitation to Wendy right. The first time was too abrupt; "Dinner Wednesday." He'd known a woman as independent as Wendy wouldn't be pleased with a command like that. In the second version, he'd ended up pouring out his jumbled feelings and hopes; by the time he got to the end of the first page of paper, he'd known it was too much. He wasn't ready to spill it all out to her. So finally, he compromised on a simple invitation, and a reference to their past.

He hoped it would work.

After sending it off with a kid—he'd tipped extra to make sure the urchin didn't 'lose' it along the way—he decided to distract himself with a tour of the city. St. Louis was huge, grander than anything he could have imagined. As he'd noticed with Wendy on Sunday, the sheer scope of the city made him uncomfortable... but also fascinated him. All around him there was signs of human ingenuity, and more people crammed in one place than he could imagine. He was used to wide open spaces and no one to talk to and having to rely on himself. He wondered if any of these people could survive a year out in Wyoming.

He wondered if someone like *him* could survive a year in St. Louis.

Because after getting fitted for a new ditto suit and bowler hat—both of which would be delivered tomorrow to Mrs. Gardner's—Nate was considering that possibility. Hopefully not a *full* year, but he was thinking about staying as long as it would take to convince Wendy to come home with him. Back to *his* home, at least. Of course, the city was *her* home, so maybe she'd want to stay here... forever. Did he love her enough to give up his home, his livelihood, to stay here with her? What would he even *do* here in the city? Was there a place for an Indian horse-breeder used to the freedom of the range, crammed here into this labyrinth of metal and flesh?

The only open expanse in the city—that he'd seen, at least—was the river. The Mississippi was bigger than anything he could have imagined, and he wondered if Ash remembered it. His brother had spent his early life here in this city, and sometimes spoke of the pollution and noise and crowds... but not this magnificent river.

The industrial district alongside the river was just as interesting as he'd expected. He must have walked for miles, up one street and down another, never quite sure where he was, fascinated by the machines and mechanisms around him. Sometimes he stopped and chatted with groups of dirty, hard-working men, asking them to explain what they were doing. Those men were roughest and dirtiest in the coal-processing district. The factories firing bricks and making paint created clouds of dust that made it hard to breathe, especially to a man used to Wyoming's clear air.

But the most interesting district was the area where alcohol was being produced. Nate stayed away from the liquor distilleries—he stomach roiled at the smell—but the beer breweries were fascinating. Since he'd skipped lunch, Nate tried a street-vendor's offerings and paired it with a beer from the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Association. He'd had their beer before—apparently it was shipped all over the country on refrigerated rail cars—but it tasted better here, at the source.

Afterwards he kept walking, out of the industrial districts and along the shaded avenues. The snow had held off all day, but the sky turned gray, and he was glad for his thick coat and scarf. As the afternoon shadows lengthened, he found the gate to a Fairground, and paid the minimal entrance fee to check it out.

When he thought of a 'fairground', he imagined a big open field, like where they celebrated Independence Day in Cheyenne. But here it apparently meant something different. There were carefully manicured walks and trees, like a fancy park, and huge buildings he didn't bother going inside. He found a 'zoological park', and spent an hour and a half wandering around, staring at the animals that could brave the cold. He'd never imagined anything like this, and thought

how much Pete and Noah would have liked to see it. If he ended up staying here, he might have his nephews come visit him in a few years.

The thought of not seeing his home for a few years soured him, and he left the animals behind. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he stared at the trio of toughs lounging by the building's entrance until they decided to go find an easier mark to target. Then he ambled on.

It was almost full dark when he found the racetrack. He'd actually been looking for the park's exit, wondering what Mrs. Gardner was serving for dinner that night, when he'd stumbled upon the open expanse. There was a large grandstand on the far side, but the track was tranquil and still at this time of night. This was a place of horses, a place where he could be comfortable, but the snow blanketed the circle and the middle field, unmarked by hoof prints. He rested his elbows on the fence and stared out at the silent expanse.

"Peaceful, isn't it?"

Nate turned to see an older man strolling towards him. He was well-dressed, in a fine hat and long coat, and joined Nate at the rail. Nate studied him, and deciding that he didn't pose a threat, turned back towards the racetrack. "Yes, sir."

"Nights like this, it's hard to imagine that this place can be a bustling cauldron of life."

Nate nodded slowly. "I was thinking something similar."

They were both quiet for another minute, their forearms propped on the rail in similar poses, enjoying the stillness. Then the older man spoke. "You know racetracks, son?"

He'd been to the races a few times, to see Barker horses when they ran. It was a popular gambling pastime in Cheyenne, but never this organized. "No sir. Just know horses."

"Really?" He straightened, and gave Nate a curious perusal. Then, apparently liking what he saw, he stuck out his hand. "I'm Charles Green, the President of the Fair Association. I run this place."

Raising a brow, wondering what such a highfalutin gentleman was doing wandering around a racetrack at night, Nate shook his hand. "Nate Barker, from Cheyenne."

"Pleased to me you, Mr. Barker."

"Call me Nate."

Green nodded. "And I can see, Nate, that you're wondering why I'm standing here in the snow with you." Nate didn't quite nod, but it was close. "This is my fairground, and despite the way it's been collapsing lately, I can go anywhere I damn well please." He turned back to the track. "And this is my favorite part of the entire venture. I'm going to make this racetrack the real draw of the Park. The

grounds, even the animals in the zoo, are losing their appeal to the people of St. Louis. But the races... the races will win their hearts." He sighed. "And I like it best at night, when there aren't actually any races happening."

Nate was quiet for a moment, in case the older man wasn't done rambling. Then, "I guess I can understand that, sir."

Green laughed then, and shook his head ruefully. "Thank you for indulging an old man." Turning, and studied Nate once more. "Barker... you wouldn't happen to be related to Ash Barker, the horse trainer outside of Cheyenne?"

He couldn't help the way his brows rose. "He's my brother. I catch and breed 'em, Ash trains 'em."

"Remarkable! I met two racehorses last year from your ranch. They'd changed hands several times, but the current owner still knew who'd bred them." Nate shrugged, not entirely surprised Barker horses had found their way this far. "They were good animals. Good racers, although I understand not originally trained to be so."

"No sir. We train 'em as cattle-horses, but they follow commands, and mustangs like to run. So some of 'em we breed for speed."

"Really...?" Green's voice had turned speculative. He was lost in thought for a minute, and then seemed to come to a decision. "Son, I'd like you to come to my office tomorrow afternoon. I have a proposition for you that might make you a pretty penny."

Nate straightened then, not sure how to respond. The other man must have noticed. "I told you I was going to make this racetrack the next big thing. To do that, I need race-horses. Oh, there are more than enough here in St. Louis, but the track needs a collection of racers to start with. Animals we can pit against the locals, animals they can bet against. I need them to win, but not all the time. It sounds to me that your horses, bred for speed but not for racing, could be trained to be what I need."

A hesitant nod. "Yes, sir. Sounds like that."

"Good! Meet me tomorrow at, oh, say ten o'clock." Green gave Nate the address, who despite his astonishment at the turn of events, memorized it. "What would you say to a contract whereby you supply me with racers for the first, say, two years? I'll make it very profitable for you."

Nate couldn't help the way he glanced around the empty track, thinking about the dilapidation of the zoo animals' cages and the bear pit. Green noticed, and chuckled. "Oh, it might not look like much now, but this place is bustling in the fall, and during the Veiled Prophet Parade last week. But fairs are on their way out, son. Racing is going to be the next big St. Louis attraction, and I'm going to make

this Park the center of it all! In a few years, the zoo and the trees won't matter nearly as much as this track, right here."

Standing there in the winter night with a man he'd just met, Nate couldn't help but be swayed by his zeal. And of course, even if the venture failed, it'd mean more money for the Barker ranch. So he stuck out his hand again, and the older man shook it.

"Alright, Mr. Green. I'll meet you and take a look at your contract." *And talk to you about taking care of our animals.* Nate wasn't about to agree to hand over their horses without knowing they would be treated well.

"Excellent! Tomorrow at ten, Nate." Green nodded politely and strolled off towards the grandstands.

Nate found the grand entrance to the Park, and flagged down a streetcar. He was exhausted, but pleased that he'd managed to distract himself from thoughts of Wendy for at least a few hours. Because one thing Mr. Green's contract meant was that he wouldn't be able to stay here in St. Louis with her. He couldn't agree to a new contract—for two years!—and then leave Ash to supply them. He had to be back in Cheyenne, busting and breeding and training.

Which meant that he *had* to convince Wendy to come back home.

## CHAPTER NINE



Tonight was the night! Wendy couldn't decide if she was nauseous from excitement, or fear, or both. She was going to get to spend the entire evening with Nate, to explore his feelings for her and to spend time as friends. But that meant that she was going to *have* to spend the entire evening with Nate, to give him the chance to explore *her* feelings for him, and to ferret out her secrets.

Needless to say, it had been a nerve-wracking afternoon. She'd rushed through Jeremy's lessons and pre-dinner walk, and then happily sat him down at the table with his nanny and sisters before bidding them all goodnight. Luckily, she'd been able to escape before Miss Dunn asked her about her dinner plans, but she could tell that the old harpy wanted to.

And now she sat quietly in the corner of the kitchen, avoiding Martin's curious glances and Mrs. Evens' knowing looks. She had no idea when Nate would be coming—only that his invitation had said 'dinner'—but she would be sitting right here, waiting for him.

The kitchen was warm, especially in her coat, but she sat stiffly and worried her muff on her lap. Even the tantalizing smells from Mrs. Even's pots couldn't pull her from her anxious excitement. When there was a knock on the back door, she sprang to her feet and glanced towards the older woman.

"Go on, then." The cook shooed her towards the door with one hand wrapped in a dishrag. "I'm not expecting any deliveries this time of night."

Grinning weakly in thanks, Wendy hurried to the door and pulled it open.

Nate stood on the back stoop, but it wasn't the Nate she knew and remembered. No, this man was the very image of modern elegance. A heavy topcoat—complete with a velvet collar—and a new scarf with a bowler hat. And had he cut his hair? He had! It wasn't quite as short as was popular these days, but he no longer looked anything like the wild Indian boy she'd fallen for so long ago. Thank goodness she could still see his boots peeking out from beneath pinstriped trousers; she was pleased to see that he hadn't given up his

entire self.

If she hadn't known him, she would have missed the hint of doubt in those green eyes. And that's when it struck her: He'd done this for *her*. He was dressing like a civilized, stylish man—like *Steven*—because it's what he thought she wanted. What *she* had always thought she'd wanted. She'd been so very wrong.

She couldn't let him stand there uncertain. "You look very refined, Nate."

Just like that, his hesitation was gone, and she smiled to see his grin. "And you look gorgeous as always, Wendy."

He offered her his arm, and they stepped out into the night together.

"You've been busy."

She caught his questioning glance, and when she canted her eyes down at his coat, he gave a small acknowledging smile. "Yeah. I figured it was time to start dressing like these St. Louis gentlemen I'm seeing all around."

"You look the part. Very handsome."

"How come you don't sound like you mean that, then?"

He knew her too well. She remembered cutting his hair for him, a lifetime ago. Standing behind him, running her fingers through his hair, watching the way the little goose bumps formed on his neck from her touch. He'd probably gone to a barber for this haircut, and it hurt a little to think of someone else touching him like that. Which was stupid, because she hadn't seen him—hadn't touched him—in three long years. He wasn't *hers* to get jealous over, no matter how hot that feeling was in the pit of her stomach. Why, he'd probably had women throwing themselves at him while she'd been gone.

So she didn't answer, but gripped his arm tighter, and pressed her cheek to his shoulder. Like they were kids. Like they were married. Like they were someone else. His free hand covered hers, and she liked that he was still wearing his leather gloves.

They crossed back from Pratte to Park Avenue, and started walking along the rail lines. "I thought you would've liked seeing the new me. You were always writing about the fancy styles and the fine clothing in the big city. Serena's like that, and Sebastian has elegance dripping off of him. I assumed..."

She tried to reassure him. "You look magnificent, Nate. Like a businessman who belongs here."

"Is that who you want, Wendy?"

Her mouth went dry. *Is that who you want?* A man like Steven, or Mr. Morgan, who belonged here in a refined city? Or did she want Nate, as he'd always been; free and just a bit wild and perfectly happy to love the big wide nothingness of Wyoming?



She smiled ruefully. She'd always wanted Nate. But now that he was within her grasp, she couldn't have him. Couldn't hurt him that way.

"It doesn't matter what *I* want, Nate. What *you* want is all that matters."

"You." She stumbled at his candor, and he stopped to catch her in both arms. Staring up at him, she shivered at the promise and the intensity of those mossy green eyes. "I've only ever wanted you. I've been waiting to have you since we were kids, Wendy, and I've followed you way out here. I can change my clothes and cut my hair, if that's what it takes to make you love me, Wendy."

*Make you love me.*

Dear God, she was in love with him. She'd always been in love with him. And now she'd lost him, due to her stupidity and naiveté.

The tears came then, but she turned away from him to wipe them from under her glasses before he noticed. It didn't work, because she felt him squeeze her elbow. "Wendy?"

She *did* love him.

Wendy wanted to turn then, to throw herself into his arms, to press her cheek to the hollow at the base of his throat. To borrow the strength of those sinewy arms and hard chest. She wanted to let him comfort her. She wanted to be free to love him.

Instead, she swallowed her longing, and forced her voice flat when she lied. "It's cold, isn't it?"

He made a little noise—she wasn't sure if it was frustration or agreement—and flagged down a Hansom cab. They were private, and more expensive than the horse-drawn streetcars, but they were faster and farther-ranged. Bundling her into it, he sat next to her and pulled the robe up over their laps. Squeezed next to him, the deep walls protected them from the cold, Wendy felt quite safe. Quite warm, except that he always made her feel warm.

"Now, you going to tell me what that was about?"

"No." She smiled slightly, and pretended great interest in the shops along Park Avenue. "I'm rather afraid that if I do, our evening will be ruined. And since I ruined our last outing, I don't want to do the same so early this time."

"How about later?"

"Oh, I'm sure that I could ruin our evening later on. Give me time."

"Fair enough." She could hear his smile as he took her hand under the robe. "But for what it's worth, I don't think you ruined our last outing."

The warmth in his voice drew her gaze, almost against her will, to his face. Unlike the smiling and teasing Nate she remembered from

her childhood, right now his expression was still. But she could see the amusement dancing in his eyes, and felt her stomach flip at the realization.

Her tongue was too tied to respond, and that seemed to amuse him even more. "In fact, I rather enjoyed our time together Sunday. I especially enjoyed the last part." He squeezed her hand, and leaned towards her a little more. "The kiss."

"You did?" she breathed, feeling like a ninny. Goodness, he was warm, wasn't he? She told herself that was why she was leaning towards him, drawn to his breath like moth to a flame.

"Yeah." Had his drawl always been so arousing? Or was it just that she was woman enough now to appreciate it? To appreciate the promise she saw in those green eyes? To appreciate the way he made her pulse quicken and heat spread...

They were going to kiss. Wendy knew it. It was going to be another mind-shatteringly beautiful kiss, and she was going to be taken to Heaven and Hell all at once. It was going to be even better than the last one, and worse too, because she would know how hard it would be to pull away, and *she couldn't wait*.

Then the horse took a corner a little tightly, and with a curse, the driver had to jostle the cab up on one large wheel. She was thrown against Nate, who anchored her to him with one strong arm. She could feel his frustration, but before he had a chance to resume his spell over her, she quickly scooted back to her side of the seat, certain to leave some space between them. Thank goodness for poor road upkeep, providing distractions for desperate and thoroughly wanton young women.

Clearing her throat, she stared intently out the window. "Where are we going, anyhow?"

"Forest Park."

"Really?" The answer was unexpected enough to draw her gaze back towards him.

"Yeah." Blast him, how could he look so relaxed and blasé when she was just a ball of nerves? "Mrs. Gardner suggested I'd like it, when I told her I missed trees that weren't growing in a line and cut into ridiculous shapes."

Wendy had to smile at that description of all of the carefully manicured St. Louis parks. But her earlier unfounded jealousy reared its head, and asked before she could tamp it down, "Mrs. Gardner?"

"My current land-lady. She's nice, with plenty of stories and jokes." He smiled, and Wendy told herself it was just the jealousy that made it seem like a fond expression. "She made me help decorate her Christmas tree with her the other night. I tell you, she's got a hell of a lot of personality for someone so old."

Ah. Well, that explained it. Her jealousy slunk off someplace to hide, and she said good riddance. There was no need to feel any *ownership* over Nate, after all. "Well, you always were irresistible to old ladies."

He scowled, and she smiled. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Aunt Agnes and Aunt Agatha never could get enough of you." She'd missed teasing him, for all these years.

"Looks like they have, though." The carriage took another turn, and he pulled her close again to anchor her. When he didn't make any other move, she relaxed slowly against him. "Miss Agatha is stepping out with Ian MacLeod now. Did Serena mention that?"

"She most certainly did *not*!" Wendy ignored the bite of guilt at the reminder that she still read Serena's letters, if not his. "I remember Mr. MacLeod being... crotchety."

Nate chuckled, and she felt it through her chest. It felt nice. "That's an understatement. But he's gotten better since Cam got married, and he's got two new grandkids to distract him. Annie said that Miss Agatha said that she likes all of his new 'energy'." Wendy stifled a giggle at his grimace. "Swear to God, her words: 'his energy'."

"Well," she managed not to choke on her laughter. "I don't think we need to hear any more about his 'energy' or anything else the two of them have been doing, thank you very much. But," she sneaked a glance at him, and was pleased to see his smile, "I would like to hear more about Cam's new family."

So for the rest of the trip, Nate held her and told her all about the amazing woman Cam had married. She'd never met anyone who was half-Chinese, and she found herself longing to hear Tess's stories in person, and to hold little May. For that matter, she would like to hold Rose, her first niece, and see the boys and Molly and Annie and Ash again. And Serena and her aunts and all of her friends in Cheyenne.

This wave of homesickness was worse than any she'd experienced since those first few weeks in the city. She missed her family. She missed her home. She missed Nate, and *he was sitting right beside her* for goodness's sake. She'd given up so much for some stolen moments of happiness that she thought would be forever. She was a fool.

The tears were threatening again when the Hansom pulled into Forest Park. She'd been here before in the daytime, but the torches and the lamps made it positively magical at night. The sight was enough to pull her from her melancholy, for which she was thankful.

The cab dropped them off in front of The Cottage, the most popular restaurant in Forest Park. Wendy had eaten here a few times with the Mulligans, two years before. Nate helped her down and paid

the cabbie, who offered to come back in a few hours for a generous tip. Wendy listened with half an ear while they made arrangements, utterly enthralled by the magic of the moon reflecting off the snow around her.

When Nate turned to her, he must have seen something in her expression that gave him pause. He cleared his throat. "I was going to ask if you were hungry, but you look as ready as I am to go exploring."

"Oh yes, let's!"

With a smile—that special smile that he used to save just for her—Nate pulled her away from the restaurant's blaze of light and into the shadowed woods. Forest Park was only a few years old, and at over a thousand acres, was still mostly undeveloped. *Here* was the natural beauty that Wendy had missed from home. *Here* was the magic and the wonder of snow drifts among tree trunks.

It started to snow slightly, and she thought she might burst, from the sheer perfection around her. Nate started to chuckle, and she turned to him, a smile on her face. "What?"

"You look like a kid with a handful of candy."

She laughed, and it felt good to let some of the wonder escape. "I *feel* like a kid. Oh, Nate, isn't it beautiful?"

"Yeah." That drawl again, and the way he was looking at her said that he wasn't talking about the trees. She blushed, and looked away.

Inspiration struck, and she knew how to distract him. Scooping up a handful of sheltered snow from beside a trunk, she pelted him hard in the chest. He didn't make a move to block or dodge, like he had when they were younger. Instead, he stared down at it incredulously. Good Heavens, he was the only man she knew who could look so loose and relaxed while dressed in a suit. But when he slowly turned those eyes back towards her—dark now, in the dim reflected moonlight—she knew he wasn't as civilized as he was pretending. She saw the wildness and savagery which she'd always tried to convince him wasn't there... but that she loved.

With a squeal, she did what any young woman with an interest in self-preservation would do; she turned and ran, deeper into the woods along the little path. He growled, and she laughed, and they were children again.

She should have known that she didn't have a hope of outrunning him. Still, she was laughing when he tackled her, and they both tumbled into a pile of snow. He turned slightly to cushion their fall, and made sure that she landed on top. The beauty of the scene wasn't marred in any way by her breathlessness at the way he held her.

Black on white, that's what she saw, looking down at him. His hat had fallen off, and his hair spread against the snow beneath them. Dark skin, dark coat against white... but she knew that the metaphor had no meaning. This man was honorable and good and deserved the best things in life.

She wished she could give them to him.



Nate had stopped breathing, with her poised over him like that. She was in control now, and although he ached to kiss her again, he wasn't going to foolishly try to, like he had in the Hansom cab. No, it was up to her now.

She rested against his chest, her head held proudly above his, and he didn't think he'd ever seen anything so beautiful, so desirable. Oh yeah, he desired her alright, but more than that, he desired her love. He wanted to find out what was wrong, find out why the idea of loving him made her cry, and *fix it*. He wanted to be the one she turned to with her troubles, the one who helped her solve her problems. He wanted to be part of her life.

But the joy in her eyes turned to hesitance, and he exhaled slowly, knowing that she wasn't going to kiss him again.

"Wendy?" His whisper broke the silent spell around them.

She wiped at his cheek with gloved fingers, and he wished it were warmer, so that he could feel her skin against his. "I'm sorry, Nate." His stomach tightened, wondering what she was about to confess; but she was just apologizing for their earlier scuffle. "You have snow *everywhere*."

He managed a light smile, and helped lift her off of him. She scrambled to her feet, and even retrieved his hat, pulling it down over his ears with a fond smile. He helped her brush off as much snow as possible from her coat, and then his. Then, hand-in-hand like it was the most natural thing in the world—and maybe it was—they strolled on.

It was one of those nights where the world seemed to be holding its breath. Soon they were far away from the lights and warmth of civilization, and he was thankful for the almost-full moon lighting up the scene. It was so quiet that he could hear the tiny, crystalline sounds the snowflakes made as they landed on branches and pine needles. Quiet enough to hear his own heartbeat, and he felt like he could hear hers beside him. He squeezed her hand, and she turned a wonder-filled expression to him. It was all he could do to

keep from taking her in his arms and kissing her. Only the memory of the way she'd pushed him away the last times kept him from doing it.

"Thank you."

"For what?" Their whispers fogged the air around them, but it was the kind of night that called for hushed voices.

"For bringing me here. For sharing this with me. It's..." She looked up, smiling, and his throat tightened at the way the flakes fell on her cheeks and lips and lashes. "It's... beautiful doesn't describe it." *No, it doesn't*, he thought, watching her. "Amazing. Wonderful. *Magic*."

He didn't think he'd ever loved her more than he did at that moment, experiencing her wonder and joy at something as simple as a moonlit snowfall. But he couldn't tell her that, not after the way she'd cried all over him earlier. So when she turned another smile on him, he just squeezed her hand. "Yeah. 'Magic' is a good way to describe it. Reminds me of home."

She blinked, and her dark eyes turned melancholy. "Yes, it does." He was sorry he'd brought it up, and wondered what she remembered when she thought of Cheyenne. Wondered if she still thought of it as "home". Wondered if she ever had.

"What do you think they're doing back at the ranch?"

"Right now?" Nate shrugged. "In the winter, they let the kids stay up past dark, reading and telling stories. Like when you were there, just...crazier now, with three of them."

She had a snowflake stuck to the corner of her mouth. Without thinking, he reached up to brush it away. To his surprise, she caught his hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"I bet they're all ecstatic about Christmas coming up."

"Yeah." He smiled, thinking about Christmases with his nephews. "They're into everything, trying to find their presents. Ash has me hide them in the top loft of the main barn, where they're not allowed to climb."

She smiled too, but it was melancholy. With a sigh, she dropped his hand and turned to walk on. He felt empty, somehow, after that shared moment. But then she took his hand again, and they ambled off through the snowy woods, speaking of past Christmases.

After a few minutes, the light ahead grew stronger, and they began to hear voices and snatches of laughter. As they got closer, they realized that the path they'd been on had circled them back towards the central buildings, as in other parks. They emerged from the woods to see The Cottage restaurant again, but she didn't drop his hand.

Dinner was memorable only because he shared it with her. The proprietor, a Mr. Herbert, came by to make sure everything was to their liking, but Nate hardly glanced at him. He was utterly entranced by the beautiful, gracious and outgoing woman across from him. They

spoke of all sorts of things; the city, the ranch, her life at the school. He asked her about her writing process and what it was like getting published. She told him about having to keep her career a secret from her employers—Nate wasn't surprised, considering Mrs. Blakely didn't appear to approve of anything—and about her relationship with Mr. Lee, her publisher in Chicago.

"I never get to see him in person; we communicate almost entirely by post. He trusts me to get him the work, and I trust him to mail me my checks once a month." She leaned forward, her eyes bright behind her round eyeglasses. "Producing art, Nate, isn't like working a wage job. I work hard to write a story without getting paid. But then it's published, and as long as people are buying that story—even years from now!—I'll get paid. Mr. Lee sends me reports on how each story is selling, so that I know which types are popular."

He was impressed. "So the more you write, the more you publish, the more you'll get paid?"

"Even if I don't write anything else ever, I'll still get paid from these stories!"

"You ever think about quitting work, then? Going someplace simpler to just focus on your writing?"

"Every day." He could tell the words slipped out, and she regretted them. Lips pressed tightly together, she smiled thinly, apologetically. "I mean, you've met Mrs. Blakely. The whole family's just like her. But I guess I feel I owe it to Jeremy to make sure he's ready for school, and to help him become a slightly better person than his mother would have him be."

Nate toasted her, and that sentiment, with his wine glass. "You said you wanted to come to St. Louis to make a difference in the world. Even if Jeremy had been your only pupil—and I know you changed those other kids' lives too—I'd say you've done that."

Her eyes met his, bright and full, and her lips parted slightly. "I think that's the kindest thing anyone's said to me in a long while, Nate."

"Well then," he took a sip, "I'll have to try harder." She flushed and looked down at her plate. "You deserve the best in life, Wendy." He just wished that he was worthy of giving it to her.

"No I don't." He barely heard her whisper.

"Yes you do. You've done great things, and you're still doing them. You deserve to be pampered and taken care of, so that you can write to your heart's content."

When she looked up, there were tears in her eyes. Impulsively, he placed his hand on top of hers, where it lay on the table. The shock of her skin against his made him catch his breath, and try to tamp down his arousal. After a moment, she turned her hand over to lace

her fingers through his. He rubbed his thumb over the sensitive skin of the inside of her wrist, and hid his smile when she shuddered slightly. She wasn't immune to his touch.

The rest of the meal was mediocre, after that caress.



During the cab ride back to the Blakely house, Wendy tried her hardest to imprint every moment of the evening on her memory. She told herself that she wanted to use it as fodder for one of her stories, but suspected it was because it was positively *the* most magical thing she'd ever experienced. And not just that incredible scene in the snowy woods, no. It was *Nate* who had made the evening so special, between his caring and his banter and his touch.

Wendy rubbed her wrist, remembering the feel of his bare fingers on that skin. Who knew that part of her body was so sensitive? Not her, that was certain. She was no stranger to lust and arousal, but this... this was something different. Nate made her feel things she'd never imagined with another man, and couldn't have begun to describe in written word.

Nate made her feel complete.

He was lounging next to her on the bench seat, his arm casually draped around her shoulders. Everything he did seemed so at-ease, and he always managed to look so relaxed. Only his gloved fingers, tapping out a rhythm on the arm rest, showed that he was furiously thinking.

"I didn't tell you *why* I got all suited up."

"You mean it wasn't for me?" He smiled at her teasing, and squeezed her shoulder.

"Besides that, I mean." He took a deep breath, and Wendy felt it in her own chest. "I had a meeting yesterday, with Charles Green." Wendy couldn't place the name, so she raised a brow, inviting him to explain. "He runs the city Fairgrounds, and wants to buy our horses for the racetrack up there."

"Nate Barker!" She let some of her pride color her smile. "You've been in this city less than a week, and already you're making business deals! Maybe you *do* belong here!"

She'd been teasing, and the words just slipped out. If he was trying to fit into the city, it was because of her; he would never really 'belong' here. Judging from the cloud that passed over his expression, he knew it too.

"I would stay, you know. If that's what I could do to be with you. To make you happy."



*Oh God.* Why did he have to be so sweet? Why couldn't he just let her go, and head back to Cheyenne and all the ladies she was sure had swooned for him over the last three years?

He must have seen her expression, though, because he sighed. "But now I can't. This is a good contract, Wendy. And I made a ballsy move, signing it without Ash's input. I just committed us to providing runners for the next two years... I can't turn all of that over to Ash to take care of. I have to be there with him."

She'd *known* that his visit would be only that: a visit. She'd *known* that he would go back home, and that's what she wanted. But hearing him say it, so soon after she wished for it... took her by surprise. She gripped her hands together tightly, and willed them to be still.

She felt him take a deep breath, and closed her eyes. "The thing is, Wendy... I'm not ready to leave you yet." She melted a little more. "I want..." another deep breath, "I want you to come home with me."

She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip, willing herself not to cry. Not to explain *why* she couldn't go home with him. But he didn't give her a chance to say anything, just hurried on. "I know that you came here to make a difference, and I don't want to get in the way of that, or ever make you feel like you have to choose between your work and your family. Really."

He pulled his hand from around her shoulders, and slipped it under the robe to grip her hands tightly. She clutched them like a lifeline, not sure if she was relieved or heart-broken that he thought she couldn't go home because it would interfere with her work.

"So I guess I'm not asking you to come home forever, Wendy. Come home for a visit. Just to see Molls and Annie and the kids, if nothing else. Celebrate Christmas with us again. It's something special, with the kids now. I promise I'll even bring you back, when you're ready, even though I know you could—and did—make the trip by yourself. I mean, I know you're capable..."

He trailed off, as if aware that he was rambling. She loved him even more for it, for giving her credit for being able to handle a simple rail journey. Turning to him, she smiled up at him through tears she refused to shed, and squeezed his hands.

"Thank you, Nate." She cleared her throat. "I'll... I'll consider it."

He nodded once, gruffly, and was reaching for her with his free hand when the Hansom rolled to a stop. Shaking his head, he paid the cabbie and helped her down onto Park Avenue.

Tucking her beside him again, they turned onto Pratte. He cleared his throat. "Can I take you to dinner again, Wendy? Don't say no."

She was glad for the change of subject. "Maybe I'll take *you* to dinner. What would you say to that?"

He grinned slightly and tipped his head towards her. "I'd take you up on it. You always told me you were as good as I was. So I could stand to let you pay." He bumped her shoulder with his, like they were kids.

"Good. Tomorrow?"

She caught his wince. "I have plans. Mr. Green wants to introduce me to his partners, so we're having dinner at his club."

She gasped, and rocked to a stop. When he turned to her, she asked incredulously, "*His club*, Nate? That's..."

"Amazing, huh? Can you imagine? Inviting someone who looks like me...?"

She took his arm again. "Oh, shut up. Not everyone is as close-minded and bigoted as you fear, you know. There are plenty of good, fair-minded people in this world, and Mr. Green obviously knows value and worth when he sees it." This time she was the one to nudge him with her shoulder. It was a common refrain; something she'd tried to pound into his head as kids that obviously hadn't stuck. "Besides, that's not what I meant. I *meant* that no wonder you were looking so refined and civilized. You don't just have a contract, Nate, you're making business contacts! You *are* a natural, just like Ash always said." Her brother-in-law claimed that while he was the one who was skilled with animals, Nate was the brains behind the ranch. Wendy, being loyal to her friend, believed him.

"Maybe." Nate shrugged. "But now that I've got the chance to see you again, I'm regretting making the plans with Green. Not when I could spend another fantastic evening with you..."

She smiled and pressed her cheek to his shoulder, like it was the most natural thing in the world. "It was a lovely evening, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." They passed by the Blakely house, draped in all of its Christmas finery, and turned into the normally-bustling alley to take them to the back door. "Friday night, then?"

"Of course." *Friday... Friday*. There'd been something about Friday. Something that an evening with Nate had completely chased from her mind.

"Good. And on Friday, I'm not picking you up at the back door, Wendy." They halted in front of the stoop of the kitchen door. He turned her to face him, holding her arms gently. It was still snowing, but she felt unaccountably warm. "I'm marching up to the front again, and I'll use the bell this time," she smiled at his teasing, "but I'm not going to sulk like we're doing something wrong. You're a tutor, for God's sake, not a criminal. You have the right to use their front door."

His voice had gone hard, and Wendy swallowed, her throat dry. *This* was his businessman's voice, the one that brooked no argument. It had been years since she'd heard him command like this, and despite her innate belief that she was his equal, she couldn't help being impressed by this bold Nate. He made her feel a little weak-kneed.

When she didn't respond right away, he gave her a little shake. "Alright, Wendy?"

A nod was about all that she could manage. "Alright, Nate."

"Good..." His face went all soft again. He took a step closer to her, still holding her arms, and her hands came up to rest on his chest. They were pressed against one another, there on the back stoop of her employers' house, where anyone could see... and staring up into his gorgeous eyes, holding her breath, Wendy positively didn't care. She found herself pushing up on her tiptoes, straining to reach him.

"And now, Wendy..." She swallowed as he leaned in towards her and dropped his voice to a whisper, "I'm *not* going to kiss you." *Wait, what?* "I've been thinking about it all night—Hell, I've been thinking about it since Sunday. I've been thinking about it for *years*. That kiss was everything I'd imagined, and more, and I think you enjoyed it too."

Wendy was too confused to answer. He *wasn't* going to kiss her? That's a good thing, right? She didn't want the distraction of his kiss interfering with her life, her determination. She didn't need his touch reminding her of everything that she'd had and lost. But then, why did she feel so utterly deflated, to find out that she wasn't going to be getting it?

Nate wasn't done with her, though. "But I'm not going to kiss you, because it—your reaction to it—confuses you, and you don't like being confused." God, he still knew her too well. "So I'm going to send you inside, and you're going to lie in bed tonight, and you're going to think about me *not* kissing you." She swallowed at his command, wondering how she could do anything *but* think about his kisses. "And by Friday, I want you to be un-confused. Because you can damn well bet I'll be kissing you then."

She had absolutely nothing to say to that. Nothing she *could* say, besides "oh."

He shook her, slightly. "But when you do that little thing with your lips like that, you're really trying my resolve, so you'd better get inside." Good thing he was still holding on to her, because she didn't think she could find her way to the door at that point. As it was, he had to help her up the stairs, and help her find the key. Good Heavens, *why* was she so weak-kneed? What had he—this bold Nate—done to her?

He pushed open the door, and shooed her inside. Her last view

of him was him pulling the door shut again. “Good night, Wendy.” And then he was gone.

She slumped against the door. “Good night,” she whispered to the dark kitchen. It was a long few minutes before she felt strong enough to throw the lock and tiptoe upstairs to her room. She performed her ablutions, but found that she was too excited, too full of memories, too aroused, to sleep.

Instead, she sat down at her little table with her latest story and tried to capture the way Nate made her feel. She wasn’t entirely successful, but she drew on the magic on the evening to enhance her characters’ romance. Madly scribbling across the journal pages, she held her breath, afraid of losing the memories before she could get them down on paper.

Her Hero had come to rescue her Heroine from the hell she’d gotten herself into.

Like Nate, boldly sweeping into her life, planting impossible dreams. *Could* she go home with him, even for a visit? Could she celebrate Christmas with her family one more time?

Did she deserve rescuing?

## CHAPTER TEN



December 21, 1883

Tonight had been even better than Wednesday evening. When Nate had arrived back at Mrs. Gardner's that night, the older lady had taken one look at him and burst into laughter. "You look like a cat that's got into the cream, young man. Can I assume she kissed you back tonight?"

"Nope." But he'd smiled. "No kissing. But a nice time anyhow." He'd retreated to his room before his grinning landlady could offer him any whiskey, and spent the night thinking about Wendy. And how stupid he'd been not to kiss her.

But the gamble had paid off, because she'd been much more at ease with him tonight when he'd picked her up. He'd marched right up to the front door—lavishly hung with garlands and red bows—and rang the bell. A stately silver-haired old man in a dark suit had opened the door, and stared at the visitor impassively. Nate bristled, and opened his mouth to tell him that he was there for Wendy... when she appeared. She must have been waiting for him in the parlor, and was already wearing her coat and bonnet. He would have liked to wait on her in the foyer, to help her get ready to go out... but he supposed that he'd take what he could get. For now.

"Thank you, Martin." Her voice had been low as she slipped by the older man.

Nate was surprised to see a smile crease Martin's face, as his gaze flicked from her to Nate. "Have a good time, Miss Murray."

She slipped out onto the porch, and as Martin was shutting the door, Nate had heard Mrs. Blakely's voice call out from inside "Who was that, Martin? Who was at the door?"

Wendy burst into giggles and fairly tripped down the steps to link her arm through his. "Come on! Let's get out of here before she comes to check." She started pulling him down Pratte, but Nate pretended to hang back out of concern.

"You forgot your glasses, Wendy. Wanna go back and ask Mrs. Blakely to help look for them?"

“Shhh!” She slapped his arm playfully, still dragging down Pratte Avenue. “I didn’t forget them, I left them at home. I wanted to look nice tonight, and I look more dignified without them.”

He couldn’t contain his laughter then. “Oh yeah! You look plenty dignified now.”

Realizing she’d been practically running away from the house, Wendy abruptly pulled to a stop, and dissolved into giggles as well. It took a few moments before, breathless, they were able to continue on their way.

It had been the start of a remarkably *fun* evening. How long had it been since he’d had *real* fun with a woman? Not since Wendy had left, definitely. He’d never really opened up with people outside of his family; they were the ones who knew and loved him... and Wendy was one of them. Tonight, they’d been like kids again; laughing and teasing and even throwing snowballs at each other again.

He’d taken her to Fairgrounds Park to show her the zoo animals—which she’d seen several times with Jeremy—and the racetracks, which she’d never seen. He explained Green’s idea about building a larger grandstand and selling concessions, and making the races an actual *event* to be seen at, rather than just someplace gamblers went. She’d been impressed, but more interested in his role in the enterprise. And he had to admit that it had made him puff up a bit to see how proud she was of him.

Afterwards, they went to Faust’s Oyster House downtown on Broadway. It was famous enough that Nate had heard of it even out in Cheyenne, although he’d never thought he’d have the chance to try it. It was overpriced, and he hadn’t been thrilled by the food, but the atmosphere made up for it. Of course they hadn’t eaten in the roof-top dining room, but they’d snuck up there to see it anyhow. And Wendy had looked... well, just stunning. She blushed when he’d told her that, and explained she’d purchased the pale blue confection for an engagement party her last employer threw for a niece. Nate didn’t care where she’d gotten it; it was perfect for her. She looked like a goddess.

They laughed a lot, and he teased her mercilessly about not wearing her spectacles, and offered to describe the décor for her. She stuck her tongue out at him—in public!—and teased him right back about his table manners. They had a grand time talking about Nate’s plans for the Barker horses, and her writing. He asked her all sorts of questions about her characters and plots, and thought that he could sit there for hours—his chin propped up on one hand—listening to her gush excitedly about her ideas for future books.

Sitting there, in a fancy restaurant, all decked out in his new

ridiculous finery, across from the most engaging woman he could imagine, made Nate feel... like a real man. Not like a half-breed Indian kid who was just pretending to run his brother's ranch. Proud to be here, with her, looking like he belonged.

And now they were walking back down Park Avenue, peering into windows of shops all decked out for Christmas and watching other strolling couples. The evening had been perfect, and he'd made a point of not pushing her to give him an answer about coming back to visit Cheyenne. But he'd noticed the way her breath hitched whenever he touched her. She might have seemed at ease with him, but it was an act. His caresses made her hot, and he knew she was thinking about his threat to kiss her tonight.

He couldn't wait.

"Oh!" She'd pulled to a stop in front of a big store, with huge glass windows on either side of a grand entrance. Nate was used to seeing stores like this in Cheyenne, where they displayed goods in big windows to draw buyers' attention, but this was something else entirely. The windows stood twice as high as him, and there were garlands and glittery balls and snowflakes cut from something sparkly hanging throughout. The magnificent red ball gown on display had caught Wendy's eye, and he watched the way her eyes lingered on the impractical lace and flounces.

He wondered how well she could see it, without her spectacles, but decided that he'd teased her enough that evening. "You'd look nice in that."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Don't be silly. It's completely impractical." Exactly what he'd been thinking. "Especially back home." She sighed. "But it certainly is lovely, isn't it?"

He had to admit that she was right. "You're right, though. It wouldn't really work for the ranch. Maybe in Cheyenne... It's a big city now, you know. Lots of parties, and... uh... ladies' teas and whatnot." She looked at him with a raised brow. "You could probably find someplace to wear something like that."

A laugh, the kind he'd come to cherish over the last few hours. "You really have no idea about women's fashion, do you?"

"None at all. I just want you to move closer to home. I'd tell you anything..." *Damn.* He'd told himself that he wasn't going to bring up her coming back to Cheyenne, and here he was, blabbing about it all over the street.

But her smile was accepting, and a little sad, when she pulled him on. "No, if I moved back home, I wouldn't want to live in the city, any more than you would."

"Why not? You and Serena always said that you wanted to move someplace refined, civilized."

"Maybe. Things change. People change."

Yeah. Obviously they did. What the hell was she hiding from him?

"Oh, look!" Her excitement seemed a bit too forced to be real, but he allowed her to drag him towards another store window. There was a bunch of kids in front of this one, their noses pressed to the glass. It wasn't hard to see why; inside were dozens of mechanical soldiers and trains and wooden horses. They were arrayed across a red dais, with an effigy of St. Nicholas overseeing them.

"Do you remember that first Christmas together, Nate? How you'd never heard of St. Nicholas, and I read you the poem?"

Squeezing her hand, he told her the truth. "I remember every single thing about that Christmas." It had been the start of beautiful traditions that more than made up for his lack as a kid. Not that his brother hadn't tried, but they hadn't had time for frivolity. And before he met Ash, he'd never had the chance to wish for toys or sweets, like these kids or Noah and Pete. Back then, if someone had told him about the Christmas tradition of getting gifts, he would have wished for a decent meal or a break from the beatings. In fact, when Ash had taken him in, he thought all of his wishes had come true.

Now, this Christmas, he had only one wish. And she was standing right beside him.

Wendy was smiling, fondly now. "That was our first real Christmas since the Great Fire, you know. Molly worked so hard to make it special."

"She strung cranberries and popcorn into garlands and taught me and Ash how to decorate a tree with 'em. Ash was terrible at it—remember, he had a broken arm that year? I thought that those things were a waste of good food, but it sure was pretty."

"I remember that we'd known you two such a short time, but when Christmas arrived, you suddenly became family." Her arm was linked through his again, and she squeezed it against her. "I knew even then that you were something special, Nate."

"Wendy, I..." He wanted to tell her that he loved her. That he'd always loved her. That more than anything he regretted letting her go off without telling her so. That he'd wanted to kiss her since almost the day he'd met her, but had been utterly content with just being her best friend for so long.

But instead he cleared his throat and forced a smile. "...I should get you back, before we both freeze." She looked confused and a little let-down. Had she guessed what he hadn't said?

The walk down Park to Pratte to the Blakelys' home was quick. He marched her right up to the porch, and liked the way she turned to him expectantly. He smiled. "What?"



"Listen, Nate, I've been dreading another kiss from you all night. If you're going to do it, please go ahead and get it over with."

He raised a brow. "Dreading it?"

"Your arrival has caused any amount of upheaval in my otherwise boring day-to-day life. Just when I thought I had everything figured out, you showed up. And just when I thought that we could go back to being friends, you kissed me."

"*Dreading It?*" He was teasing her now; he could tell when a woman he kissed enjoyed it, and she'd definitely enjoyed it.

"Yes. And... possibly... looking forward to it. So, please. Just..." She took a step closer, and made an exasperated little noise. "Oh, never mind, I'll do it myself."

She kissed him. She put her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. He smiled under her lips, felt her smile back, and that was when he stopped thinking.

Somehow, standing in the shadows of a snow-covered porch, the moon bright overhead and the building climbing up to the stars all around him, Nate was perfectly at ease. He was a stranger in a strange place, but he had Wendy.

And *Good Lord*, did he have her. He let her kiss him, and liked the way she tried to take charge, even if it was obvious she didn't quite know how to do that.

She gave a sexy little moan of frustration, and he was lost. Wrapping his arms around her, he took over the kiss, and she gladly melted against him. He taught her how to nip and suck, how to change pressure, how to make love with her lips.

She was a fast learner.

He slanted his lips across hers, placing small kisses at the corner of her mouth, before moving down her neck. She groaned and tilted her head back, giving him better access to that little sensitive spot at the base of her neck, and he almost came undone then. God Almighty, but she was sexy. Was it just because he'd wanted her for so long? No, a blind man could see the sensuality she tried to keep hidden behind her strict academic façade.

Her arms fell from around his neck, until she was clutching his shoulders. "Nate," she gasped, and he liked the way how desperate she sounded. Like she needed something only he could give her.

He was the one to groan this time, and moved his lips back to hers. He supported her with one arm, and reached up to gently caress her with the other. His hand dropped to her breast, bundled beneath layers of thick wool, satin and cotton. But he imagined that he could feel the nipple harden, and from her immediate reaction, he wasn't too far off. She seemed to jump under his ministrations, giving another little desperate moan, and pressed her body against his. He

was in real danger of losing his control, right here on her employers' porch.

A noise from the front door interrupted them, and Nate had the sense to be thankful for it. Somehow, he lost all of his restraint around her.

It was Martin, pulling open the front door to find the two of them locked in what was definitely a passionate embrace on the front porch. Nate saw the older man's eyes go wide, and then soften into pity, a moment before he heard a strange voice say "Well? What's the problem? Let me out."

"Oh no," Wendy breathed against his neck, "*Steven*."

Wasn't Steven the name of the Blakely sibling that she'd mentioned in her last letter to him? The one that she thought she could be friends with? Then Martin was pushed out of the way, and the haughtily sneering man who bore so much resemblance to Mrs. Blakely that he *had* to be her son peer stopped short at seeing the couple on his parents' porch.

"Well, well." Nate's eyes narrowed at the other man's amused tone. "What have we here? Entertaining vagrants now, Wendy?"

Nate felt her stiffen in his arms, and he slowly released her, trying to keep his hands from fisting. He liked the way she didn't look flustered, and met Steven's gaze with aplomb, as if she'd done nothing wrong. They hadn't, of course, but he admired her composure.

"This is my close friend from Cheyenne, Steven. He's come to visit."

"He's doing more than 'visiting', I can see." Nate wanted to wipe that smirk from the man's pale face, but he tried to follow Wendy's calm example. "In fact, he looks like a very close friend indeed. When he leaves, do let me know if you need another... 'friend' to take his place."

Wendy gasped at the insinuation. Nate was already moving towards the blonde man when she grabbed his hand. He rocked to a stop, wanting with all of his heart to put his fist through that sneering smile. All of the passion and frustration Wendy's kiss had kindled in him was now directed towards violence.

Steven could tell he'd made an enemy, but it didn't seem to bother him. Did he think his wealth would protect him, then? "Oh, where are my manners? Do come in." He backed out of the way, sweeping his arm aside as if inviting them both in.

Nate would have rather tangled with a mountain lion than shared a space with this viper who seemed to take pleasure in causing hurt. But Wendy had to enter that house—in fact, she was already stepping towards the door with her head held high—and he'd be damned if he was going to let her go alone. Still holding her hand, he

followed, helping her over the threshold. He could feel her vibrating beside him, but didn't know if it was from fear or anger.

Martin carefully shut the door behind them, but didn't leave. Instead the older man stood at a sort of attention, occasionally flicking concerned glances Wendy's way. Nate was glad she had at least one ally in his house.

"Nate," Her voice was strained, but he thought she was doing an admirable job of containing her emotion, "This is Steven Blakely, Jeremy's brother. He lives in Salt Lake City now. Steven, this is Nathaniel Barker, whose brother is married to my sister."

Neither man acknowledged the other with as much as a nod. Why was Steven being so... so *mean* to Wendy? Nate knew why he'd hated the other man immediately, but why was Steven sneering at *him* like he was a piece of trash? Was it just that he just as bigoted as his mother?

"Jeremy told me you were coming today. I confess I'd forgotten." Nate could tell that the other man didn't appreciate being forgotten, and Steven turned his caustic expression back to Wendy. "But I can see that you're heading out." Indeed, the other man was dressed in what looked like a tuxedo under his great coat, complete with white cravat, top hat, and cane. Apparently when he came home to visit he really lived it up. "And we don't want to delay you. Please feel free to come visit your brother after his lessons tomorrow." Nate watched the muscle in her jaw jump. "I'll be sure to leave you two alone."

"And why would you do that, Wendy? When you know that you're the one I'd be there to see?"

"You and your family give Jeremy far less credit than he deserves. He is a smart boy who will one day—"

"Yes, yes," Steven waved his hand theatrically, "we've all heard your little crusade on behalf of my invalid baby brother." He took a step closer to her, and lowered his chin in what he probably thought was a seductive manner, all but ignoring the way she still gripped Nate's hand. "But *he's* got nothing to interest a man like me, a man with needs and... *desires*. You, on the other hand, interest me very much, as you may recall." The way his gaze lewdly raked her body left his intent perfectly clear.

Wendy gasped, and Nate couldn't stand idle any longer. He pulled her back, placing himself between her and Steven. He opened his mouth to give this jackass a talking-to, but felt her tug on his arm first. "Just let it go, Nate."

"Absolutely not." He turned back to Steven, making sure his fury was evident. "If this son-of-a-bitch—" Steven inhaled sharply at the fully intended insult, "thinks he can make lewd comments about

you just because he's rich, he's got another thing coming." It had been a long time since his anger had boiled over like this. He wanted to smash Steven's face in, and was just barely containing himself for Wendy's sake.

"Please don't let him push you."

"*Push* me? The man just insinuated you—"

Steven interrupted, his voice laced with disdain. "Who's *insinuating*, boy?" The term was a calculated insult that made even Martin gasp. "Although I can't imagine why I need to defend myself to someone like *you*. Why in the world would you deign to be seen with a *savage*, Wendy, when you could have had *me*?"

Nate growled then, low in his throat. "You want 'savage', mister? I'll give you savage."

"Nate, please..."

"What is going on here?" Mrs. Blakely's imperious voice rang out from the upstairs landing, but Nate didn't bother to glance her way. "Steven, I thought you'd left. Whatever are you doing—Miss Murray! Is that your Indian?"

"Mrs. Blakely—"

Steven interrupted Wendy. "Don't worry, mother. I was just tossing him out." Nate growled again, unable to help himself, and shook off Wendy's restraining hand. "Although I wonder if I should toss Miss Murray out as well, for keeping such company...?"

Even after all these years, Wendy knew him well. Her sharp command broke through the red rage that urged him to leap on this bastard, to tear him apart. "*Nathanial Barker!* Don't you *dare* lower yourself to his level!"

Steven took immediate umbrage. "My level?"

"He needs to be taught a lesson, Wendy."

"Miss Murray!" He could see Mrs. Blakely sweeping down the stairs behind her son. "*What* is going—"

"Nate, he's trying to provoke you," Wendy interrupted, "Just ignore him."

"Absolutely not."

"Oh yes, *Nate*," Steven's falsetto was mocking, "do listen to your whore."

Time stopped. Nate vaguely heard the sharp gasps from Wendy, Martin, and Mrs. Blakey, but he couldn't see anything beyond the scum in front of him. Everything else faded into the distance, and in a sharp, factual way, he knew that he was going to badly hurt this man. For calling Wendy—the woman he loved—a whore.

Eyes narrowing, Nate's voice was deceptively calm when he asked, "You got any special rules to fighting in this city, Mr. Blakely? Meeting at high noon in the street? Or can I just go at you right now?"

“Miss Murray—”

This time it was Martin who interrupted the old woman. “I believe, sir, that pistols at dawn, while antiquated, is still the accepted response to a challenge.”

Steven scoffed, a measure of doubt beginning to enter his expression. “Don’t be silly. I’m not going to duel—”

“Good. Works for me, too.” Nate hit him hard, with a right and an uppercut that knocked the other man back. He felt that hatchet-like nose break under his fist, and grinned.

Mrs. Blakely was screaming, and he could hear Wendy giving orders to Martin, when Steven pulled himself erect with the bannister and launched himself at Nate. He let the bastard get in two punches—both to the gut, and both ineffectual—before Nate dove back in enthusiastically. He hit Steven on the cheek, and then the jaw again, four times, five times, pushing him back.

The dandy had obviously learned to box in a ring someplace; Nate had learned on the streets as a kid. He wasn’t ‘boxing’...he was *fighting*. Where he’d learned to fight, men did it to survive, not for points on a board.

Steven didn’t stand a chance.

When the red haze cleared, Nate was standing over Steven, who was huddled on the floor at the base of the stairs. That pitiful excuse for a man was bleeding all over his mother’s rug, and she was having some sort of fit half-way up the stairs.

Not even breathing heavily, he turned to Wendy and was surprised by her expression. The blood had drained from her face, and she was staring at Steven’s crumpled body. When she turned those deep blue eyes on him, he saw accusation and despair on her face. Dear God, was she blaming him? Was she sorry he stood up for her, defended her? The idea that she disapproved of his actions hit him in the gut, harder than any blows Steven might have landed.

“Wendy?” His whisper startled her, and when he put one hand out to her, she shied away. It was only then that Nate realized the backs of his knuckles were bloody, to match Steven’s face.

Mrs. Blakely had subsided into a cold silence, and only then spoke. Her voice was strained, but Nate couldn’t tell if it was from her screaming, or if she was livid. Probably both. “Martin, go into the street and flag down a constable. Have this *savage* forcibly ejected from our house.”

Nate smiled grimly, and nodded to her. “Don’t bother Martin, I’m leaving.” He stepped over Steven—who was moaning now—and retrieved his hat from where it had fallen. His anger was still simmering now, despite Wendy’s disapproval. “I need to scrub the stink of this place off of me anyhow.”

The older woman didn't seem to hear, or care. "And you, Miss Murray. You are responsible for bringing this *thing* into our home. I cannot believe that I allowed you such freedom, such responsibility. You are obviously tainted by marriage, and are no longer welcome here. Hopefully your influence on Jeremy can be eradicated by another tutor before he leaves for school."

Wendy looked ready to faint; her face was even paler, and her hands were gripped before her. But even as he watched, she drew herself up as if a stick had been inserted down her spine, and her chin rose. Before she could say anything in response, though, Nate spoke in her defense.

"Don't be stupid, Mrs. Blakely." He tried not to let his anger seep through into his words, but it was hard. She was shooting herself in her own foot to dismiss Wendy because of his actions. "I'm the one you've got a complaint with, and I'm leaving. I'll even leave Steven my address, so he can come find me if he wants to continue this. But don't let Wendy go because you're mad at me."

Mrs. Blakely was very definitely not looking at him. Instead, she stared down at her butler. "Martin, when these two miscreants have left my home—and they will do so immediately—please help Master Blakely up to his room and send Mrs. Evans to tend to him."

"I'm fine, mother." Nate was impressed the man was still conscious, truthfully, and resisted the urge to pound his face in again.

"Immediately, Martin." The old lady turned and haughtily climbed the staircase again.

Wendy swallowed, and turned to the butler. "I am not leaving this house without my journals, Martin."

"Yes, Miss Murray. Please hurry, though."

"I'll go up the back stairs." Before she left, she held her hand out to him, and the older man gripped it firmly. "Thank you for your kindnesses, Martin."

"I'll have your trunks packed up and sent to you tomorrow, if you'll leave me an address."

"I will." Her whisper was almost lost as she hurried towards the back of the house, without once looking in Nate's direction. And again, that felt worse than any other blow.

Martin glanced at Steven, and one lip turned up slightly before he slammed his austere expression back onto his face. "Mr. Barker, you'd better leave."

"Well, *I'm* not leaving without Miss Murray, Martin."

The old man nodded once, and Nate thought he saw a hint of approval there. "Well then, perhaps I'll wait with you on the porch, and you can give me her forwarding address."

And so they did. Nate propped his hip against the garland-hung

railing, and shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his coat, and watched Martin shiver until he'd copied down Mrs. Gardner's address. When the old man left, Nate turned to the street and tried to figure out what the hell just happened.

Wendy had lost her job, and her home because of him. She had nothing now, because he couldn't let an insult to her pass by. He didn't regret teaching Steven a lesson—maybe he'd think before he insulted a lady so egregiously again—but he did regret Wendy taking the brunt of the punishment.

Her immediate shock and disapproval of his actions suddenly made sense. She must have known that this would happen.

He was all she had now. It was too late for her to get a room; he'd let her have his bed at Mrs. Gardner's. Twenty minutes ago, after that kiss, he might have tested the waters to see if she'd mind him sharing it with her. But now his ardor was decidedly cooled, and hers was positively frigid.

He wouldn't be surprised if she'd refused to even look at him, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He'd gotten her into this mess, and he was going to take care of her, by God.

Nate had always been good at talking himself out of bad moods, and now was no different. Sure, she was jobless now, but at least she wasn't living with that horrible family anymore. Why, maybe he'd be able to convince her to head back to Cheyenne for a spell. Just to visit the family, if nothing else. To meet Rose, and see Serena, and spend another Christmas with those who loved her. Like him.

After the New Year, he could offer to help her find a job closer to home. Sebastian would probably jump at the chance to hire another teacher with her experience, even if she'd never gone to a fancy college like him. Nate looked up at the moon, which suddenly seemed a little brighter. Yeah, and if she stayed in Cheyenne to teach, he'd be able to court her properly, and prove that he was worthy of her love.

But when the door opened and she slipped out, gripping a large satchel and her muff, he remembered that he *wasn't* worthy. He'd just proved that he was the savage everyone called him. He could tell from her expression—she refused to look at him—that he'd lost whatever gains he'd made in her affections over the last week.

"Come on." He took her bag from her, and she followed him meekly down the steps. "I'm taking you to Mrs. Gardner's house. You can have my room."

"Very well." Her whisper barely traveled, and he was glad he couldn't hear what must be the ice in her tone.

"Martin's sending your trunks there tomorrow. She'll store them for you."

"Very well."

He opened his mouth to assure her that everything would be okay, but stopped. Everything *wouldn't* be okay. He had royally, completely, absolutely screwed up her life.

She was never going to forgive him.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN



She was never going to forgive him.

He had completely, utterly ruined her life, and she refused to even speak to him. *Why* hadn't he listened to her, trusted her judgment?

*How* could he have acted so... so *rudely*? He'd ruined a beautiful evening, an evening that she might have remembered for the rest of her life for its perfection. She wouldn't forget it now, though, oh no, but it was the horrible ending that she'd remember. Nate had always been so gentle with her, so thoughtful and kind... it was hard to grasp he was the same man who had just mutilated Steven with his fists, despite her begging him to stop. Why hadn't he listened to her?

He'd always hated the term 'savage', and Wendy had spent years trying to convince him that the word didn't describe him. But, if she was honest with herself, the little bit of primitive wildness he *did* possess was part of his appeal. Even when they were younger, she was drawn to the untamed part of him. Apparently while she'd been gone, he'd become even less... *tame*. How could someone who appeared to be such a gentleman fight like such a barbarian? He'd been like a character from one of her books.

She could have told him that this would be the result of that fight. Just inviting Nate into the Blakely house was probably enough to be let go from her position; bringing in the man who nearly killed her son was as good an excuse as any for Mrs. Blakely. And now she had no home, no job, no purpose. Thanks to Nate.

Wendy had to admit that she wasn't entirely sad to be leaving the Blakely house. If it wasn't for Jeremy, she would have hated it there. As it was, she'd miss the boy, but more miss the chance at preparing him for school. He deserved better than his mother could give him. But she'd actually been looking for a new position for quite a few months now, in contact with the Mulligans and Mr. Morgan at the High School, but nothing had come up.

Thus, she knew there were no other positions available as a tutor for young deaf children. She could always go back to teaching, but she really lacked the patience for discipline. It's possible that she

could earn enough by writing, but rent was expensive in the city, which is why she preferred positions where board came standard.

So when she'd left the Blakely house that night, she'd known that she was out of luck. No job, no way to pay rent, no place to live. She thought that not speaking to Nate was the least he deserved. *I knew this would happen if he let Steven provoke him! Why wouldn't he listen to me?*

The ride to Mrs. Gardner's house was icily silent, with Nate not even bothering to defend himself, just staring out of the street car's windows broodingly. Like *he* had a reason to pout. But his landlady was kind and solicitous, despite the look she'd thrown in Nate's direction promising that he would explain later.

Wendy had ignored them both, except for a whispered 'thank you' when Mrs. Gardner led her to an empty bedroom. She hadn't had to share Nate's room after all, and was frankly a little disappointed. The lout deserved to sleep on the hard floor after what he'd done. But that would have meant sleeping on his bed, wrapped in his scent and warmth, remembering what it was like to be held by him... and frankly, that wasn't going to help her snit.

The morning after her world had fallen apart, she'd been sitting alone in Mrs. Gardner's parlor when both of her trunks had arrived from the Blakelys. Wendy had put down her writing and stood at the window to watch Nate help unload them, and then tip the delivery driver. So she wasn't entirely surprised when her old friend opened the door and joined her.

The entire room seemed to get smaller as he'd leaned one elbow on the mantel above the small fire. She tried not to look his way, but it was almost impossible; everything about the blasted man drew her attention and her eyes. *Why* did he have to be so handsome? Still, she did a tolerable job of pretending interest in the street outside of the window.

"You got any prospects in the city, Wendy?" She turned a blank look on him, and he'd elaborated. "I mean, do you have any reason to stay here? Any jobs lined up? A place to live?"

Mutely, she'd shaken her head, managing to keep the tears from her eyes. Had he come here to rub in her total humiliation, then? Damn him.

"Then I'm taking you home."

Home. A simple enough word, but a complicated concept she'd fought for a year. She missed her family terribly, but had been strong enough to keep her shame from them for this long. Now, there was no way she'd be able to hide her secret; with no job and no way to live in the city, she would have to go back to them in disgrace. And God knew what they'd think of her then.

Her despair must have shown on her face, despite her best efforts, because Nate had hurried to reassure her. "It doesn't have to be forever, Wendy. Just a visit. Just for Christmas. Come home and see everyone who misses you, meet your niece." She'd turned away then. He knew exactly what to say to make her long to return to Cheyenne. "Use the time to try to find another job, even in this city, if that's what you want. I'll come bac..."

He'd cut himself off then, and Wendy hadn't been able to guess what he'd been about to offer. She wasn't even sure if she cared. He swallowed, and then continued, quieter. "Just for a visit Wendy? Please don't say no."

*Damn.*

Well, it wasn't like she had any other option, was there? And it was stupid to keep fighting against something that she wanted so desperately anyhow. But she didn't want Nate to think he could get away with planning her life so absolutely, so her whisper was icy when she agreed. "Very well."

From the corner of her eye, she'd seen him wince, and then begin to say something else and think better of it. When he'd left the room without speaking, a defeated look on his face, she tried to feel victorious, but the emptiness inside her was too vast.

So now they were on a train, heading west. It was only her third train ride in her life, but it was impossible to be excited. Whereas both of her last journeys by train had taken her towards her new life, a future filled with possibilities, this one was taking her home. Defeated. Her purpose in life, her job, had been removed, and she had no hope of obtaining another. She'd left home years ago, determined to make her own way in the world, and she had. But now she was returning, beaten and hopeless, and it wasn't even her fault.

Every mile that took her closer to Cheyenne meant that she was a mile closer to facing her doom. What would they say if they knew? Would she be able to keep her secret while visiting her family? How could she explain why she'd been so distant, without telling them the truth? Oh God, how had she gotten herself into this mess? It had been so easy to ignore their questions when she was a thousand miles away, but soon she'd see them, hug them, and see the hurt and accusation in their eyes.

Was it any wonder that she still wasn't speaking to Nate? She'd managed to keep her snit going throughout the whirlwind of activity it took to close up their affairs in St. Louis and secure tickets west. Wendy said her goodbyes to Mrs. Gardner—who hugged her surprisingly warmly—and insisted on stopping by the telegraph office on the way to the train station, to inform Mr. Lee of her new address.

When they'd boarded the train, she'd been staggered to

discover that Nate had splurged on a spot in the sleeping car for the two of them. There were comfortable, private seats with a beautiful picture window and a little table, and two comfortable bunks that folded out from the wall. The sheets were clean and straight, and there was a porter who was in charge of just their car. It was positively luxurious—and only one step below a private car.

When they were shown to their seats, Wendy turned an amazed look on Nate. He actually looked chagrined. Rubbing the back of his neck, he shrugged. “Well, it’s not like I don’t have the money. And you should be comfortable on the trip.”

“Just me?”

“Well, there *are* two seats here...”

She wanted to smile, but she didn’t dare. Instead she gave him her shoulder and watched the departure preparations out the window, and let him think she was still stewing at his high-handedness and savagery. Which she was. *Right?*

The problem was that deep-down, she was glad to be going home. She was looking forward to hugging her sisters and Serena again. She *wanted* to spend Christmas with her family. But it wasn’t her choice, it wasn’t on her terms, and she definitely wasn’t prepared to explain her treatment of them. And *that’s* why she was still incredibly irritated with him.

And now, after almost a full day on the train, she still wasn’t speaking to him. He’d given up trying to make conversation, and now just spent most of the journey staring out the window at the snow-covered plains flashing by, his long booted legs propped up on the seat in front of him. He’d changed back into his old clothes, but didn’t look the same with his hair cut short. As Wendy surreptitiously studied him, she realized that his short time in the city had changed him, and she wondered if it was permanent. When he was back home, back to his element, would he forget about the harsh lessons learned in St. Louis? About the cruel people who doubted him because of his skin color? She hoped so, for his sake.

She’d spent most of her time writing, frantically scribbling in her journal. Because even if she never taught another deaf child, she still had her writing. And she still had a deadline she had to meet; Mr. Lee had agreed to accept her manuscript by post from Cheyenne.

She was working on her Hero story again, but it had taken a decidedly less-romantic turn.

*Betrayal! Her heart felt like it was breaking in two! How could he do such a thing to her? How could he treat her so callously?*

*“Trust me, beloved, I have done it for your own*

good.”

*“Ha! As if you have any idea what is good for me! You are still too stubborn to see that I can manage my own affairs. Still too ignorant to acknowledge my mastery of my own life.”*

*“I only want what is best for you. I have only ever loved you.”*

*She laughed in his face again, but it was bitter. “Impossible! You have loved many women. I can see it in your face; hear it in your words. You believe yourself to be an expert on women.”*

*“Lies! You are the only*

Wendy gasped as her journal was yanked from under her pencil. Nate had casually leaned forward and pulled it away from her where she’d labored over it on the small table between them. Now he spun it around and started reading the exchange she’d been working on. Before she could gather breath to protest—and get past her shock long enough to find something coherent to say—he’d flipped back several pages and started reading from the beginning of that section.

“How dare...! Give that back!” Wendy reached out try to snatch it back, but Nate was faster. Casually, he lifted one booted foot and plunked it on the table between them, forcing her to pull back or run the risk of draping herself across the dirty shoe. “What...?” She took a deep breath and pushed her spectacles back up her nose. “Nathanial, remove your foot from my workspace.”

“Shhh.” He turned the page, apparently engrossed in her writing.

*“Nathanial.”*

*“Shhh, reading.”*

“Nate. Give me back my journal.”

“No.” He flipped another page, and she was angry enough to scream. Instead, she took another deep breath, placed her hands in her lap, and started to pretend she had his neck between them.

“Nate, you’re making a scene. This isn’t proper.”

“Don’t care; reading.”

He looked so intent, so silly—reclined with his boots up on the table of a *Pullman car*, for Heaven’s sakes—that she burst into laughter. She immediately tried to clamp down on her mirth, but it was too late. He lowered her journal, and his feet, with a grin on his face.

“I knew you couldn’t stay mad at me.”

“Then you don’t know me quite well enough. I’m still livid.”

Nate sighed, and returned his attention to her story. She could

tell that he wanted to argue, and was almost disappointed when he didn't. "Well, at least you're speaking to me again."

"Hmmm." Eyes narrowed, she refused to admit any such thing. "Give me back my journal."

"Okay." Carefully, he closed it and passed it to her. She snatched it back, and pressed it to her breast. "That isn't the story you were working on in the Blakelys' parlor."

"No..." She didn't want to admit that she'd started a new one after he'd sauntered so sexily back into her life.

"I like it. I'm looking forward to reading more of it."

"Well, if you can bring yourself to *ask* next time, maybe I'll permit it."

"Really?"

"No, I'm still very angry at you."

He shrugged, as if awarding her a concession, and it made her feel better somehow. "There's more passion in this one, Wendy. Like your first books. The last two have been... I dunno."

"What?" She rarely got to speak with someone who'd read her books, because so few people knew she was the author. Only her editor gave her any feedback. Still, it felt odd to be listening to *Nate's* opinions about her stories. Her curiosity about his opinions was enough to bring her out of her snit.

"They've been good, don't get me wrong. I've liked the adventures. But they didn't exactly have a Happily Ever After, did they?"

She *harrumphed*. Is that what he meant? "They weren't supposed to. As an author, I've grown past the need for unrealistic platitudes, and have learned to write life as it is."

"You're saying you don't believe in Happily Ever Afters anymore? How about True Love?"

Her scoff was tinged with sadness. "I'm saying I live in the real world now, Nate, and I'm trying to reflect that in my writing."

The look he gave her was strange; incredulity mixed with pity, and a bit of sorrow. She straightened her back and turned to study the landscape flashing by, refusing to feel badly for her beliefs. *You're not supposed to be speaking to him anyhow, remember?* Apparently she needed the reminder.

Nate was quiet for so long that she figured he'd fallen asleep, but refused to give into the temptation to look his way. She was glad that she hadn't when he spoke. "The woman in your latest story... is that you?" She tightened her jaw and didn't respond. "Are you upset because I don't think you can take care of yourself? Because that's not true. If that's supposed to be me," from the corner of her eye she watched him point one long finger at the book still clutched to her

breast, “then you’ve got it wrong.”

Reminding herself that she wasn’t speaking to him didn’t work. “Of course it’s not supposed to be you.”

Only, it was. Nate was her Hero; he’d always been her Hero, even if she’d refused to believe that she needed one.

“Really? Because it seemed like—”

“*It’s not.*”

He smiled, and she cursed herself inwardly for noticing. For being drawn into conversation once more. For allowing him to bring her out of her snit, *again*.

“I think that you can handle your own affairs, you know. I’m not ‘ignorant’.” He nodded towards the book, quoting her most recent scene. “If that’s what your sulk is all about...”

Damn her inability to stay quiet around him. “Well, since you’ve *finally* gotten around to *asking*, Nate, I’ll tell you. I’m ‘sulking’—as you so *kindly* put it—because of how you acted.”

“I’m sorry you had to see me like that.”

“Are you sorry you did it?”

“Not at all.”

“See? That’s why I’m angry. I *told* you not to do it. I practically *begged* you to stop!” Wendy could feel the heat climbing up her cheeks, and struggled to maintain control. “I *knew* what Mrs. Blakely would do to you—to me—if you allowed Steven to provoke you! That’s why *I’ve* managed to go so long without hitting the insufferable wretch myself. I knew that if I *did*—if *you* did—I’d be without a job.”

He braced his elbows on his knees when he leaned towards her. “So? You expected me to just—”

“I *expected* you to *listen* to me, Nate!” She clenched her jaw, refusing to allow the angry tears to enter her eyes. “I expected you to trust my judgment.”

“I wasn’t going to let that insult pass, Wendy.” Both of their voices were rising, but she couldn’t make herself care about the scene they might cause.

“Why not? I was. If you’d left then, maybe—”

“He called you a whore!”

“Maybe he was—” *right*. But she clamped down on the word before it could escape. She’d kept her secret for so long, it was instinctual. Only her anger at Nate had allowed the damning confession to almost slip free.

But Nate’s expression had gone cold, and his voice icy, when he asked, “Maybe he was *what*, Wendy?”

She tightened the muscles in her jaw, refusing to answer. The way she felt now, so raw and exposed, it was likely that anything she said would result in an emotional collapse. She couldn’t trust herself

around him.

With a sniff, she turned to look out the window once more, pretending great interest in the scenery flashing by. She didn't even look his way when he said her name again.

He sighed then, and from the corner of her eye she watched him slouch back against the seat across from her. A long moment passed, and then he sighed again. "I'm sorry. I was so damn *furious* when he said that about you, that all I could think of was that I wanted to hurt him as much as he'd hurt you."

She closed her eyes. *Oh God*, he'd seen that? He'd understood what Steven's words had done to her? How just seeing him made her want to hide in shame? He'd realized how Steven hurt her?

Wendy hoped he wasn't expecting a response she couldn't give, but Nate continued. "I heard you ask me to stop. I should have known you'd have a good reason for it. But I couldn't. I guess I acted like the savage everyone thinks I am."

Even after all of these years, he still believed that about himself. All of her words to him as kids hadn't helped. There was a part of him that was still wild, and it had come out Friday night in the Blakelys' foyer. And she loved him for it. As shocking as it had been to see him standing over another man, his fists red with blood, there was a part of her that remembered a younger Nate's reckless exuberance when breaking a new horse, and knew that this... *wildness* was part of his appeal. He wasn't a savage, no... but he'd never quite fit the mold of a proper businessman either.

She wouldn't want him to. She loved him just the way he was.

Wendy couldn't stop the two tears that seeped from under her eyelids then. She twisted further in her seat, so that he wouldn't see. From the noise he made—part sigh, part pain—he thought she was still angry. "I'm sorry, Wendy."

So she nodded, stiffly. That was all she could manage then, without falling into his arms and confessing all sorts of things that didn't need voicing.

He didn't say anything else, and she didn't either, for several hours. He'd gotten up and paced the aisle a few times, nodding politely to fellow passengers and never leaving the car. She'd written more, using the hopeless anger she'd felt towards Nate influence her Heroine's tirade against the Hero. In books, characters loved one another enough to ignore flaws... in real life, love was about *overlooking* flaws, not ignoring them. She'd been livid at Nate, but once he'd understood and apologized, she'd remembered how much he'd meant to her.

Sighing, she pulled her spectacles off of her face and rubbed the bridge of her nose. This wasn't a book. This wasn't True Love. This



was the feelings of a stupid young woman who deserved every bit of her misery as repayment for misery she'd caused.

"Are your characters still mad at one another?" Nate was lounging across from her again, his arms crossed, studying her. It was almost dark, and they'd be stopping for dinner soon.

She slipped the glasses back on, and bent over her journal again. "Yes." Apparently she was speaking to him again.

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes." Was she? She didn't feel angry anymore, but she wasn't quite ready to forgive him yet. With one action, an action that he should have been able to avoid, he'd changed her life without any say from her. He deserved a bit more of her snit.

"You need to give your hero a chance to defend himself, you know."

"Hmmm."

"If that's supposed to be me—"

"It's *not*." Of course it was supposed to be him, but she wasn't going to admit it. She glared at him.

"Well, I'm not as 'ignorant' as you seem to think I am."

"It's not you!" She pulled the book closer to her lap, wondering if he could read her handwriting upside down, or if he was just quoting that scene from memory.

"Also, I haven't 'loved many women'. I'm not an expert on women. Just you, Wendy."

She didn't know how to interpret that. "You think you're an expert on me?"

"I think I know what you want. I just don't know the secret you're hiding from me."

*Thank God.* She had to turn his attention. "You expect me to believe that you haven't kissed anyone else, ever?" He'd said that he'd been thinking about kissing her for years, after that amazing afternoon in the museum. But she found it hard to believe that he'd been pining all this time.

And she was right, judging from his panicked expression and his sudden interest in the scenery. She narrowed her eyes to hide her victorious smirk. "How many women have you 'loved', Nate?"

He still didn't look at her. "I'm not telling you that, Wendy."

"Ha! I thought so. Expert indeed..."

"Shut up." His mumbled response to her teasing made her feel vindicated, knowing that she'd made him as uncomfortable as he'd made her.

She wanted to push him, to make him more uncomfortable out of revenge... but was half-afraid that he'd turn the question back to her. *How many men have you loved, Wendy?* She couldn't answer that,

not to him.

Studying his profile for a moment more, she noted his clenched jaw and the way that he wasn't quite as relaxed as he'd wanted her to think. He might have fooled someone else, but not her, who knew him so well. Satisfied that she'd irritated him enough for the moment—almost as much as he'd irritated her, in fact—she opened her journal and fell back into her story, determined to maintain her sulk around him. Their conversations were just too engaging to be healthy to her current state of mind. She had to stay angry, or she'd lose what little control she had about her return home. All of her attention and energy needed to be focused on her family, and parrying their questions about the way she'd treated them for the last year.

She *had* to be angry at Nate, or her love for him would show, and she'd lose any chance to manage her own life.

Thus, thankfully, they didn't speak again until they'd reached Cheyenne.



The days of that rail trip were some of the longest days in Nate's memory. He'd discovered early on that the vague stomach complaint that had plagued him on his journey eastward hadn't abated. It seemed that his stomach just didn't care to be hurtled across the plains at what seemed like a few hundred miles per hour. The scenery rushed past faster than a horse could possibly travel, and Nate didn't really like it. He felt better if he was facing forward, and looking at something besides the scenery, but that meant looking at Wendy, and he could only stare at the top of her head for so long.

He'd quickly gotten used to the frequent stops the train made in every little two-horse town, frustrating as they might be to a traveler in a hurry. Why, it'd gotten to the point where he could nap right through the porter—George's—constant announcements about which stop they were coming up on. When they changed trains in Omaha, Nate used the break to send a quick telegraph to the Carderocks in Cheyenne, letting them know he was bringing Wendy home. Then he stood and watched the wires, amazed to think that his message was speeding west much faster than even Mr. Pullman's cars. He shook his head thoughtfully; the world was changing, and he wasn't sure that he liked it.

What would Serena do when she got the message? Hopefully she'd be there, because this close to Christmas, Nate planned on heading directly to her home when they arrived. He'd say his hellos,

and drop Wendy off to catch up with her friend. With the way Wendy had been acting, he was pretty sure she wouldn't even notice when he said his goodbyes and headed out. Nate wasn't sure yet where he'd go; he didn't want to crowd Wendy, but he didn't want to head all the way back out to the ranch either. He had to be on hand, to try to convince her to forgive him.

*She* was the reason that the train journey was so miserable. Besides that argument about her writing, she'd barely strung three words together to him the whole trip. He'd caught her looking at him a few times, but she either ignored his attempts at conversation, or gave little one-word answers to his questions. So he was stuck sitting across from her for long hours, not wanting to stare out the window too much, but not having anyone to talk to. Meals were easier, at least, because they could watch the people coming and going through the stations, and he was pleased to be on a seat that didn't rock back and forth.

He was *bored*. That was it. After his time in St. Louis, the time he spent with her, he knew that she was still a conversationalist who could get him laughing and thinking and reminiscing. He'd had *fun* with her... which is what made this silent treatment that much worse.

He'd even considered stealing her journal again, just to get a rise out of her, but dismissed the idea as something she'd expect. He'd noted that she always wrote with her other hand on the book, now, probably to protect against his high-handed actions. Noticing that she'd packed some of her other books in her valise, he asked for permission to borrow one. Surprised, she glanced up at him, and then at her books, but hesitantly nodded. He propped his feet up beside her again—ignoring her little huff of disapproval—and settled down to re-read an old favorite.

But he couldn't concentrate on the book. Couldn't concentrate on anything except her, and the chance that he'd almost certainly lost. Things could never go back the way they used to be, now.

How many times had he cursed his temper? It had been so *stupid* to attack that jackass in his parents' home... but truthfully, Nate would do it again. Steven had deserved it. The Blakelys thought Nate was a savage, and his actions had proved it. But he *did* regret losing his temper so thoroughly in front of Wendy.

No, that's not true. He didn't regret beating Steven so badly, but he did regret that Wendy had to be there, and begged him to stop. Nate wouldn't have stopped, not for anything, not after that insult... but now Wendy thought that he'd ignored her pleadings on purpose. Well, if he was being honest with himself, it *was* the truth. He *had* ignored her, but not because he hadn't believed or trusted her. No, it was because he couldn't control the savage side of himself.

And wasn't it just his bad luck—or horrible timing—that proved *that* only a few days after he'd managed to weasel his way back into her life and affections? She was probably regretting ever opening the door to him last week. She probably wanted nothing to do with him, now.

Her actions certainly confirmed it. Not speaking to him for two days now, sending him hot glares over the top of her spectacles, pursing those plump lips in silent disapproval. Yeah, he'd screwed up majorly when it had come to Wendy.

This was *not* the homecoming he'd hoped for.

Nate tried to engage her with stories about her family and friends, and what they'd been up to for the last three years. She quickly cut him off with a quiet "I'm trying to write, if you don't mind" and that was the last he bothered. Soon he was pouting as fiercely as she.

The nights were the worst. Pullman sleeping cars had two bunks; the upper one folded out from the wall above their heads, and the two seats were converted into the lower one. George—the only other person Nate could talk to on the trip—showed him how to switch the seats into a bed through a clever little device, and the two men got to chatting about the fascinating advancements Pullman put into his cars.

But that second night, after climbing up into the upper bunk, Nate had stacked his hands behind his head, willed his stomach to calm down, and listened to Wendy tossing and turning below him. He wanted—more than anything he could imagine right then—to go down there and gather her in his arms and keep her safe and comfortable. To apologize for getting her kicked out of her job and her house, and for forcing her to come—No. No, he wasn't going to apologize for getting her back to Cheyenne. He'd been waiting for this for years.

After almost an hour of listening to her, he whispered her name. It was amazing that she heard him over the snores of the other passengers, but she stilled instantly. Another few minutes, and he thought that maybe she'd finally fallen asleep, when he heard her slowly turn over, as trying if to make no noise.

"Wendy?"

"*What?*" He smiled at the pique in her voice.

"Can't you sleep?"

"I *could* if you'd stop talking to me."

His grin got bigger. "Sorry." She didn't respond. "Goodnight, Wendy."

After a long minute, long enough for him to realize that she wasn't going to respond, he heard her sigh. "Goodnight, Nate."

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



December 23, 1883

“Brix! I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“A pleasant surprise, I hope, Mister Nate.” The Selkirks’ elderly butler gave a little bow to her companion, before turned a deeper bow to her. “And Miss Wendy, may I be the first to welcome you home?”

Stiffly, Wendy nodded. “Thank you,” she whispered, not yet sure how she felt about being here.

Nate had bundled her off the train, and she’d waited in the warm station while he confirmed that her trunks had made it off as well. Standing there in that big room, she’d been overwhelmed with memories of another Christmas. She’d stood here, terrified and proud of her accomplishment of getting Annie and their things across the country at the tender age of thirteen. And while she’d been reunited with her sister—she hadn’t seen Molly in months—she couldn’t stop her eyes from straying to the mysterious young man standing by the main doors. He’d had long hair and dark skin and from the way he’d been trying to dig his shoulders into the wall behind him, he wasn’t comfortable being there. And then to discover that he was Ash’s brother—and hadn’t she made a fool of herself when Molly had told her *that?*—and she’d be living with him! Excitement and curiosity and a few other emotions she hadn’t been able to name then coursed through her.

And now she was back, just a few days before Christmas. She’d stood in that same place, and looked around at the same decorations hanging from the tall rafters, and wondered what had changed in the last eight years. She’d changed definitely, but here she was again, terrified... and somehow comforted by his presence. Despite her anger at him, and at being forced back here before she was ready, Wendy knew that all she’d had to do was call his name, and he’d come for her, to comfort and protect her. Her Hero.

She hadn’t called his name.

The ride to the Carderocks’ house was quiet—she still wasn’t speaking to him—and less comfortable than the Hansom cabs in St.

Louis. Still, it had been nice to be off the train, and Wendy amused herself by seeing what had changed about Cheyenne. It had grown in the three years she'd been gone. It wouldn't rival St. Louis, not yet, but it was getting there. There were Christmas trees and other decorations on nearly every street corner, and the snow had been carefully shoveled off of the streets and sidewalks—how long had Cheyenne had actual sidewalks? Millionaires' Row was grander than she remembered, especially Serena's new home. She knew that Sebastian had built it for his new wife, and it looked like something out of the Lafayette Square district where she'd walked daily with Jeremy.

Thinking of the boy—she hadn't even gotten to say goodbye!—brought a spark of melancholy. He was the part of her life in St. Louis that she'd miss most of all. Jeremy and Shakespeare. She wouldn't have anyone to confide in here in Cheyenne, no giant statues of long-dead authors to speak to. Here she only had her childhood friends, her loved ones, with whom she *couldn't* share her secrets.

Brixley took their coats in the foyer while Nate made conversation.

"The Misses Selkirk are here, then?" Had he always sounded so refined? She'd been surprised, certainly, by how well he'd fit into the social mold of the big city. Had his business dealings and all of his reading made him into such a... gentleman? The Nate she'd known growing up, and the Nate she'd seen trying to kill Steven with his bare hands, was not a 'gentleman'.

"They've been here since this morning, waiting to see Miss Wendy."

They'd known she was coming? Of course they had. Nate had obviously telegraphed ahead to warn them. He probably hoped they'd offer them a place to stay for the evening, before they ventured out to the ranch. The thought of seeing her old home sent her stomach plummeting. Here in the city, surrounded by the trappings of civilization, she felt better armed to meet her family, to try to explain why she'd been so distant.

To lie.

After Brixley disappeared with their outer wear, Wendy took a deep breath, half-dreading what was to come. Oh God, *why* had she thought it would be a good idea to try to cut her old friends out of her life? They hadn't known her secret, had no way of knowing her secret. She could have kept writing to Serena like nothing was wrong. But no, she'd tried to wall herself away, and had made sure that her letters to her best friend were cold and clinical and lacking any interest. And now she was going to pay for that.

She gave a startled little squeak when she felt Nate touch the

back of her hand. She glanced in his direction, unable to help herself, and got lost in those green eyes. "Wendy?" His whisper couldn't be heard over the *ticking* of the grand old clock that stood at the end of the hall, but she felt it. And she felt the way his fingers wrapped around hers, loaning her his strength and warmth. "Wendy, everything's going to be alright."

Damn him and his understanding tone of voice. She felt herself sag, and tears threatened. *Will it? Can you promise me?* she wanted to ask, but tightened her lips against the plaintive pleas. Instead she forced her chin up and pulled her hand from his.

He nodded once, resigned, and she felt a moment of shame at her treatment of him. But then he was knocking on the parlor door and pushing her inside.

She had just enough time to take a fortifying breath, and then: "Wendy!"

Serena's shriek was loud enough to wake the dead, and her friend tore across the room and threw herself into Wendy's arms. And to Wendy's surprise, she found herself hugging Serena tightly, so so pleased to see her again. Serena had always been Wendy's partner in the world of fiction, willing to let herself spend whole sunny afternoons immersed in a glorious made-up world, whereas everyone else lived so *realistically*. Because of that bond, the two of them had been able to talk about anything and everything, and Wendy had heard all about Serena's love life through her frequent letters. She'd been able to help her choose between Cam and Sebastian, when both had proposed, and often read about how wonderful married life was.

The smaller women pulled away first, and then reached up to cup Wendy's cheeks. "Oh, Wendy! I'm so happy you're here! It's so good to have you back, to have you here." She smiled, and Wendy saw that the three years hadn't aged Serena a bit. She was still the single loveliest woman Wendy had ever seen. "Oh, we're going to have such fun! And it's Christmas time, which is just perfect!"

Wendy didn't wait for her friend to catch her breath, but hugged her again, causing Serena's hands to crush Wendy's spectacles into her cheeks. They both laughed and pulled apart, smoothing skirts and readjusting sleeves.

Wendy said "I'm happy to be here," and was surprised to realize that she meant it. All of her worries had been pushed aside when Nate sent her through that door—he was across the room now, chatting with Serena's aunts like a perfect gentleman—and while she still had her doubts about the success of this visit, she was still pleased to be able to hug her old friend again. Letters just weren't the same.

Then she looked over her friend's shoulder, and her heart gave a little jump. There, standing perfectly still and looking like a



beautiful, ideal little lady, stood Annie. Wendy stepped towards her, and her sister met her halfway with another desperate hug. They held each other for a long moment, and Wendy could feel the tears gathering again. She grabbed Annie's hands, and stepped back, looking her baby sister up and down. She'd grown so much—although she still only reached Wendy's chin—and so beautifully. She was... perfect.

Dropping Annie's hands, Wendy unconsciously signed as she spoke. "You are beautiful, Annie! Why didn't anyone tell me what a lovely young woman you were growing into?" She gave her sister another quick hug. It felt so *right*, so wonderful, to be able to hug her again.

Pulling away, she mimicked Serena's earlier pose, holding Annie's cheeks, as if trying to memorize every aspect of her features. Tears blurred her vision. "Oh Annie," she whispered, knowing the girl could read lips, "I'm so glad to see you."

"Ahm happy...to see oo too."

Wendy gasped, and the tears fell then. Her precious baby sister, her *deaf* sister, just spoke to her. She hadn't heard Annie speak in ten years, and that she was speaking now, coherently, was a miracle. She hugged her sister yet again, vowing to do the same to Sebastian, for giving Annie this gift.

And then Serena was hugging them both, and they were all laughing and crying together. It was a long time before Wendy was able to pull herself together enough to see Serena's aunts waiting patiently for their chance to embrace her, and she happily gave them the opportunity.

In the midst of the hub-bub of reuniting, Wendy caught Nate's eye. He was lounging against the mantel, one booted foot crossed over the other, hands shoved deep in his pockets. He was watching the reunion with the strangest look on his face, as if his emotions were laid bare to her. It was almost a... longing look. In fact, he reminded her so much of that boy she'd met eight years ago in the Cheyenne train station that she wanted to go to him, to comfort him, to tell him that she was here now, to be his family. Which was silly, because she was still angry at him. But she had to admit that this reunion, here and now, was thanks to him. If his silly pride hadn't caused her to lose her job, if he hadn't pushed her to come home for a visit, she wouldn't be here, holding her sister and her best friend, in time for Christmas.

Maybe her gaze had alerted him; whatever the reason, Nate suddenly pushed himself upright and crossed to the group of ladies now clustered around the sofa. "Well, ladies, I'll let you to it."

An inexplicable panic shot through her then. "What? You're leaving me?" *Damn*. She had *not* meant to sound so... so weak and

needy.

He gave her another strange look, of confusion and uncertainty. "Yeah. With your sister and your best friend." His voice was prodding, like she needed reminding that she was fine here without him. And of course she knew that; she'd just been taken by surprise by his announcement. That was the only reason for her plaintive question. Yes, the only reason. It's not like she needed him here with her.

So she nodded, firmly. "Where will you be?"

"I don't know," and now he looked awkward. She'd bet that he *did* know where he was going, and didn't think she'd like it. Why wasn't he admitting it? "Why?"

"I just wondered if you were going... home."

"Not yet." He cleared his throat and looked away. "Figured I'd stick around the city 'til you knew what you wanted to do."

Serena took pity on them both. "Then you'll definitely join us for luncheon tomorrow, Nate? You're welcome to stay here this evening, too, but if you have other plans...?"

He nodded gratefully to their hostess. "Thanks, Serena, but I think I'll stay... uh, elsewhere."

Serena smiled and nodded graciously, and walked Nate to the door, while Wendy's eyes narrowed. *Where* was he going to stay? She'd never heard him speak of any other close friends who lived in the city. Why would he bother to stay in a boarding house or hotel when Serena or—

Wendy managed to hide her sudden realization. He was going to stay someplace *unsavory*, she knew it. Why else would he hide his intentions? But Serena had accepted his decision so easily, and wasn't at all shocked by it. Surely she hadn't misinterpreted his answer?

Vowing to confront her friend later, Wendy turned back to her sister's questions about St. Louis, and tried to answer them as best she could, when it felt like her heart was walking out the door with Nate.

Later, after a lovely dinner, Aunt Agnes and Aunt Agatha took Brixley back to their own home down the street. Wendy had joined in teasing Agatha about her budding romance with Ian MacLeod, but the older woman had just smiled brightly, and teased right back. Sebastian was just as handsome as Serena had said in her letters, and just as gentlemanly. They all had a wonderful time reliving the "Wedding of the Decade", as Agnes had put it, and Wendy enjoyed hearing all about it.

Despite having just met him, she'd hugged Sebastian fondly, thanking him for what he'd done for Annie. He'd been surprised at first, but then warmly responded, giving her most of the credit for her preparation of the girl. His words reminded Wendy that her other students had a good chance of success at an oralist school, thanks to

her teaching, and that pleased her.

She'd known that Annie now lived with Serena for a good portion of the year, to be able to attend Sebastian's school. It was so nice to catch up with her, and watch her speak, and thrill at the way she still used Wendy's sign 'language' fluently. The three young women stayed in the parlor, laughing and catching up, long after Sebastian had kissed his wife good night, and, with a wink, told her to wake him up when she came to bed.

Wendy watched the way Serena sighed dreamily and followed her husband with her eyes as he sauntered out of the room, and realized something. The two of them were very, very much in love. There was something between them physically that Wendy had tried to capture in writing her stories, but having never experienced it, knew it sometimes fell flat. And after her experience with Steven, she'd stopped writing True Love into her story. She'd told Nate it was because such frivolity didn't exist in the real world, but she was wrong. She had only to think of the fairytale love between Serena and Sebastian, or the more common, day-to-day love between her sister and Ash, to remember that Happily Ever Afters *were* possible.

She sighed herself, and grabbed Serena's hand. "You still love him, don't you?"

"More than I ever thought possible, even after reading all those wonderfully silly romance novels." When Serena smiled, she became even lovelier, which should be impossible.

The two best friends walked Annie to her room, where she hugged Wendy again, and Wendy had to blink back tears yet again. Being here, being home, being accepted for who she was and loved unconditionally, made her understandably weepy. "Goodnight, Annie. I love you."

"Ah love oo too." Another smile, and the girl practically skipped into her room. The other two turned towards the guest room Serena had assigned Wendy. But to her surprise, Serena didn't leave her at the door, but instead came in and sat on the bed. Wendy removed her spectacles with a sigh, placing them on a small table, and rubbed the bridge of her nose where they sat. Then she rifled through her valise, removing her personal items until she found her nightgown, and then ducked behind the screen to change.

With her head inside the gown, she heard Serena call "I love your hair."

Wendy chuckled when she emerged. "Thank you. I cut it off because I was sick of dealing with it. It's not *quite* the style in the city, but some women favor it." She came back around the screen, and began to turn down the bed. Serena still didn't move. Wendy sighed, and propped her hands on her hips. "Well?"

“Well, what?”

“Well, I don’t think you’re sitting there looking ready to burst because you want to tuck me in, so what are you waiting to say?”

Her friend bit her lip, and then seemed to make up her mind.

“Well, I wasn’t sure if I should mention it...”

“But you’re going to mention it anyhow, aren’t you?”

“How’d it go with Nate?”

*That* was unexpected. “How’d what go with Nate?”

“With him coming to get you and all that. You’re here, so obviously it worked. But he’s *not* here, so maybe it didn’t. I’m dying to know how he got you to come home.”

Wendy plopped down on the bed too. This was beginning to remind her of one of their childhood afternoons, relaxing and discussing matters of great imagined import... except this was real. “I’m just here for a visit, Serena.”

“Oh.” The answer momentarily distracted the petite woman, but then she smiled. “Well, that’s okay. We’re just thrilled you’re here. But still, did he come swooping in like a hero from those books he’s always lending me? Or was he more...” she lifted her brows comically, “subtle?”

“What?” Wendy couldn’t help the way her voice rose.

“Oh come on, everyone knows the man’s been in love with you for years, so—”

“*What?*” This time it was more of a shriek, and Serena paused.

“Really...? *Really*, Wendy? You couldn’t tell? It wasn’t obvious, when he traveled almost a thousand miles to find you and bring you home?”

Wendy stared at the headboard, not seeing the intricate designs picked out in the wood. He...*loved* her?

Well, of course he did. She’d seen the signs, but had refused to understand what that meant. They’d been such close friends for so long, and he obviously wanted her in his life, if his words in St. Louis had any truth. It was a little embarrassing that Serena had to be the one to point it out to her, though.

Switching her gaze to her hands, knotted together in her lap, Wendy whispered a confession. “He kissed me.”

The sound Serena made was somewhere between a huff and a laugh. “It’s about time! Did you like it?”

Wendy nodded. “I kissed him back.”

Her friend leaned across the bed and twined her fingers around Wendy’s, bending to look into her face. “Being loved by a good man is the best feeling in the world, Wendy.”

She had nothing to say to that. She had no experience being loved by a good man, only a bad one. The best man she knew had

kissed her, but hadn't told her his feelings.

Serena gave another squeeze, and then sat up. "So he kissed you, and convinced you to come home for a visit, but obviously you're mad at him."

"It's that obvious?"

"Please, Brixley could have fried an egg with the angry glares you were sending Nate's way when you arrived." Wendy smiled at the image. "And since he's opted not to stay here, I assume you two must be in a tiff."

"He acted rather... strange in St. Louis. Among other things, he got me fired."

"Oh? Oh, I *have* to hear *this* story!"

Wendy sighed, suddenly weary. "Fine, but not now, please."

"Of course. You've had a long few days—I know you don't get restful sleep in a Pullman, no matter what the adverts say." Like an older sister, Serena turned the blankets down further, and pushed Wendy against the pillows. She smiled to realize that her friend really *was* tucking her in. Serena took her hand and sat beside her on the edge of the bed. "Everything will be alright, Wendy."

"Where is he?"

"What?" Was it her imagination, or did her friend suddenly look wary?

"Where is Nate staying tonight? I didn't know that he had other friends in town, but I'll admit that I haven't been up on everything that's happened lately." *Mainly because I've been trying to ignore his letters for the last year*, but she didn't need to add that last part.

"I..."

"You're thinking about lying to me, aren't you? I can tell."

Serena sighed, and then smiled. "We'll have to ask Sebastian. He might know. If not, we'll ask Cam when he arrives with his family tomorrow."

Wendy could tell that her friend was trying to distract her, and she allowed it. "They're coming? I'd like to meet Tess."

"You'll love her. She's so interesting, and the children are adorable. They're all coming for Christmas, of course." Serena looked around. "That's why I put you in the smallest bedroom, so they could have the larger. I hope that's okay?" Wendy nodded, her eyelids getting heavy. "And I think that your family will be staying with my aunts, but now that you're here, those plans might change. We invited them all for Christmas with us this year, and we've all been looking forward to it, but you might want to spend it on the ranch..."

Wendy grabbed her friend's hand and pressed it to her cheek. "Truthfully, I'd rather stay here." She yawned. Maybe it was the exhaustion that was making her blunt. "I'm not ready to face the

ranch yet. Here, I'm... safe."

"Safe?"

She yawned again, knowing she wasn't making any sense. "A buffer. You, Cam, Tess, your aunts... between me and the past."

Serena was looking at her oddly, but then bent down to kiss Wendy's cheek, like she was an ailing child. "I have no idea what you mean, Wendy dear, but you're too tired to explain. Of course you can spend Christmas with us. We would be thrilled to have you. But for now," she stood and smoothed her skirts, and then crossed to turn down the lamp, "sleep well, and for as long as you like. Breakfast will be waiting for you whenever you wake, dear friend."

"G'night."

"Goodnight, Wendy."

She didn't remember Serena leaving the room; the pillows were soft enough to call her into slumber immediately.

She dreamed of Nate. And home.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“Hello there, stranger.”

He managed to hide his wince. He’d known that by coming to The Eden tonight he would run into Eve. This was her place, after all. But right now, he didn’t need any company... just wanted to be left alone to nurse this glass of whiskey.

But she was an old friend, and didn’t deserve his sulk. He shifted slightly, and lifted the glass in a small salute. “Hello, Eve.”

All prostitutes wore cosmetics, in Nate’s experience, but Eve somehow managed to still look like someone’s older sister, clean and approachable. Not that he had much interest in approaching her tonight, but he tried not to let that show.

He wasn’t sure how well that had worked, when her black-rimmed eyes went wide and her pink lips lifted and one be-ringed hand flew to her breast in theatrical shock. “Why, it’s Nate Barker!” He rolled his eyes, knowing it was the reaction she wanted. “I hardly recognized you, honey, looking all dandified, your hair all trimmed up!”

She reached out to touch his head, probably to rumple his hair or something similar, but Nate jerked out of the way. “Now sugar, don’t be sore.” He remembered when he liked Eve’s ability to sound scolding and tempting all at once. “I’m just wondering what’s happened to my little savage.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Ah.” She sat down on the stool beside him at the bar. There was the ubiquitous large mirror in front of them, decorated with surprising taste for the season; garland and red ribbons adorned most of the saloon, and there was even a large tree in the corner, mixing the scent of evergreen with whiskey and sex. Nate watched her reflection gesture to the bartender. “You’re getting drunk again, aren’t you?” She held up a glass in Jose’s direction.

“Nope. Just don’t like that name.”

As the bartender poured some of the amber whiskey into her glass, she asked, “Jose, how many has my friend here had?”

The older man smiled, revealing two missing teeth in the front

of his mouth. “Just the one, Miss Eve.”

“Hmmm.” She dismissed Jose with a nod, and he went back to the other end of the long plank, where two regulars—even the Christmas season wasn’t going to keep them out of the bar—were swapping jokes and stories.

“So, *Nate*. Not getting drunk, I guess. Just ornery?”

He sighed, knowing he shouldn’t take his bad mood out on her. “Yeah. Sorry.” Another sip of the whiskey, and he winced at the taste. It wasn’t what he needed now, and he knew it. He needed a different taste, a taste that had consumed his thoughts for years, and now that he’d finally had it, he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Wendy’s lips tasted better than anything he could have imagined.

“You wanna talk about it, honey?”

“Nope.”

She laughed that false laugh of hers and knocked his shoulder with hers. “Tough, sugar. I want to hear all about St. Louis. Did you find her?”

He couldn’t keep the surprise from his face. “How’d you know where I went?”

“Men talk, Nate, and I’m a good... listener.”

Who’d known that he was leaving? “Not Ash.”

“I’ve met your brother once, and he didn’t say two words to me. I guess not *all* men talk.”

“Or Sebastian. Or Cam.”

“No, they’re happily married... and no, I’m not going to tell you.” His eyes narrowed, and she laughed again. “And don’t bother trying to guess. It really shouldn’t matter to you what Brixley does with his time off—Oh no, now I’ve given it away.”

Her mischievous grin was so unrepentant that Nate’s lips curled, and a chuckle slipped out. “Fine, okay. Yes, I went to St. Louis.”

“To find Wendy?”

He wasn’t quite willing to share everything about Wendy, not with Eve. So his “Yeah” was hesitant.

“You found her?”

“Yeah.”

“Well? Did you talk? Why’s she been ignoring your letters? Is she going to come back here? Are you going back there? Don’t leave me guessing, honey!”

Too many questions that he didn’t have answers to. “We talked.”

“*And?*” Her exasperation was obvious.

“And I don’t know anything more than when I left.”



She was quiet then, fiddling with her glass of whiskey. Finally, she took a deep breath, and he remembered her telling him he was too heart-sick to give her what he wanted. After a few heartbeats, she asked quietly, “Did you tell her that you love her?”

“No.” At his whisper, she let out a breath he hadn’t known she’d been holding.

“Well, why not? Isn’t that what you’ve been waiting for? You can’t just pine here in Cheyenne with her out there, not knowing how you feel, sugar. You’re too good for that.” She took another deep breath, and then turned on him resolutely, as if she’d made up her mind. One painted fingernail under his chin turned him to face her. “She needs to know, Nate. So you can let her go, if she doesn’t love you back. I can’t stand the thought of you wasted like this. You need to move on.”

“I can’t, Eve.”

He hadn’t meant for his whisper to sound so pitiful, but her expression crumbled. Her “Oh, sugar” as she pulled him into a hug made him feel like a little boy again. “Tell me, Nate.”

So he did. He told his old friend about the journey, about finding Wendy and the bigotry of her employers. About their time together and how happy it had made them both. About how Steven had insulted her—although he hadn’t told Eve *how* he’d insulted her—and how he hadn’t been able to control his rage. “I acted like a, a barbarian. Now she knows who I really am. If you’d seen her, looking like a perfect city lady, Eve, you’d know there’s no place for someone like me—a real savage—in her life.”

Her ‘hmmmm’ was non-committal. “Did you do anything to tell her or show her how you feel?”

“I kissed her.”

Slowly, she turned a smile on him that was big and bright enough to almost block out the faint look of loss in her eyes. “Did you now? And did she return it? Was it everything you’d hoped it would be?”

“Yeah.” His slow drawl was answer to both questions.

“I’m glad, Nate. After Christmas you need to go back out and kiss her again. And again, until you know how she feels about you. Until you know if you can be happy with her.”

“I know I’d be happy with her, Eve. It’s her being happy with me. I don’t deserve someone like her.”

“Oh, shut up. You know I don’t think that’s true. And if she’s half the woman you believe her to be, she doesn’t think that’s true either. So go back to St. Louis—”

“She’s here. She lost her job when I acted so... stupidly.” Eve smiled slightly and nodded in agreement. “Which I regret, because

she's still livid at me. But at least she's back home, even if it's just for the holiday."

"Seems to me that you've been given another chance, honey."

Staring down at the whiskey in his glass, Nate wasn't sure what he'd do with another chance. "Not sure I won't screw this one up too."

Her real chuckle was deep and raspy, which is why he so rarely heard it. This time it surprised him. "Yeah, you haven't done so well so far."

Looking up, he met her eyes in the big mirror. "What do I do, Eve?"

She placed one hand atop his, and lightly stroked it. "Do you love her? Do you want her?"

"Yes."

"Then tell her. Tell her that you can't be happy without her. Tell her all of the millions of stupid things women want to hear, about how you can't live without her and how badly you want to hold her. And then make sure that she's in love with you, too."

The thought terrified and excited him. "She's keeping a secret. Something big. She won't tell me if she loves me, Eve, because she won't even tell me why she stopped writing to me. She won't tell me why she cut me—tried to cut everyone—out of her life. She's not going to suddenly open up if I tell her that I love her."

Eve shrugged. "Maybe she will. It's a powerful incentive to a lot of women." There was just enough scorn in her voice to know that he'd hit a chord.

"But not you?"

"I don't need that sort of complication, darling." Then she lifted one cool hand to his cheek, and he remembered all of the comfort and temporary happiness this 'friend' of his had brought him over the years. "But you do. And you deserve it. And if she's smart she'll see that."

He didn't have a response, but just reached up to hold her hand, turning it over to kiss the backs of her fingers. She blushed slightly, and pulled it away as she stood, suddenly all business. "Don't be all mushy with me, Nate Barker. I'm not the one you need to impress!" He smiled at her tone. "And don't be laughing at me, either."

"I would never, Eve."

Eyes narrowed, she looked him over. "Well, you're not drunk, but I'm guessing you're not staying with her tonight?" He shook his head. "And I can assume that you're not interested in female company—*other* female company?" He raised a brow and shook his head again. "I didn't think so. Well, Ruth's gone to visit her sister, so you can sleep in her room tonight, if you've a mind."

It was unnecessarily kind. "Thanks, Eve."

"That's what friends are for, sugar."

He toasted her slightly. "And thank you for the advice. And the company."

"Sometimes you need a lady friend, even if that lady is a whore, to give you advice."

"Sometimes a whore is the best kind of lady friend, when it comes to advice."

She burst into laughter, and he smiled to hear that it wasn't her fake kind. "Saints be praised, Nate Barker, you finally understand whores! Now," she gave him a mock glare, "drink your whiskey and see if you can understand ladies. And when you've decided how you're going to convince Wendy to love you, make sure you know how to keep her. She's the keeping kind of lady, honey, unlike my girls."

"That she is."

"So you put a ring on her finger, and you make her happy." Nate swallowed past a suddenly dry throat. Marry Wendy? "And make sure that she makes *you* happy, because if she doesn't, she'll have to answer to me."

With one last grin, she sauntered away, taking those little steps guaranteed to make a man notice the sway of her skirts against her bottom. But Nate didn't notice. In fact, since her arrival, he hadn't noticed anything enticing about her. He hadn't had any desire to kiss her, or to feel her hands on his skin, or to lie on her satin sheets. He hadn't wanted *her*.

Kissing Wendy had spoiled him for other women. She'd spoiled him for *loving* other women years ago, sure, but now that he'd tasted her, he didn't want anything else. He was like an addict; he'd gladly starve for one more taste of her lips.

Marry Wendy? Why not? Why had it never occurred to him that marriage was the obvious end to this journey he'd set himself on? If she loved him—and the way she responded to him told him that she sure as hell felt *something* for him, even if she *was* still angry—then he could marry her and live the Happily Ever After that she didn't believe existed. She'd been a part of his life for so long, first at the ranch, and then on his mind constantly, that he'd just always pictured them together. It hadn't occurred to him that meant marriage.

And suddenly, he knew. He'd be the happiest man alive if she'd marry him. Things couldn't go back to how they used to be, and he knew it... they'd be *better*. Together.

He wryly toasted his silent reflection. It was all well and good to make plans, but one thing he'd learned is that Wendy had a way of messing up his plans... of having her own plans. Her plans apparently

involved being mad at him forever, but he figured he could talk her out of her snit... or maybe kiss her out of it. He grinned and threw back the rest of the whiskey. And *then* he'd talk her into marrying him.

A harsh chuckle forced itself from between his lips. After all...*'twas* the season for miracles.



Wendy woke late on Christmas Eve morning. After all, she'd been traveling for days, and needed to catch up on her rest. Shortly after she started moving around, there was a knock at the door, and Sarah—the maid—came in with a tray of breakfast. Wendy thanked the girl, who curtsied and left and made Wendy feel a bit like a class traitor. She was so distracted that she ate breakfast without tasting it, and only then saw the little envelope beside the teapot, addressed to her in Serena's loopy handwriting.

*Wendy dear,  
I have to be out and about this morning, and Annie is with me. We  
are stopping by Sebastian's school, and then the library for the annual  
fund drive. We will all be back by luncheon. Nate is coming, remember.  
So rest up!*

*—Serena*

Wendy scowled, not sure what that last line meant. Did Serena think she needed all of her energy to deal with Nate? Or was her friend just concerned with her health, after her travels?

Happy to have the time to relax and write a bit, Wendy settled down at the small desk in front of the window. The view was beautiful, overlooking snow-covered Millionaire's Row and the well-dressed people hurrying about their business on Christmas Eve. She sighed deeply, allowing the beauty of the season to seep into her, pushing out the anxiety and bitterness that had clumped in her stomach and shoulders over the last week.

Had it really only been ten days since Nate had sauntered back into her life, throwing things all out of order? Since his smile had reminded her of what she'd lost? Since his kiss had opened up impossible dreams for the future?

But she was home now, or nearly home, and her best friend and little sister had welcomed her with open and loving arms. They hadn't

pushed her for explanations about her actions of the last year, although she knew that her stilted letters had to have confused and hurt them.

Maybe coming home was easier than she'd thought. Maybe she wouldn't have to face her demons and explain why she was a lesser person now than she was when she'd left. Maybe she wouldn't have to share her secret and see her loved ones' regard for her fade.

The idea of seeing Molly again filled her with the same vague sense of dread it had yesterday, but for the first time in a long while, Wendy was slightly optimistic about her future. And, if she was honest with herself, she owed it to Nate. His inability to let her go, to come all the way to St. Louis and find her, led her to this moment. His actions forced her to leave St. Louis, and confront her past. She was still angry with him, but somewhere between hearing Annie speak for the first time and waking up this morning, Wendy had completely forgiven him.

She was home for Christmas again, and she owed that to Nate.

And so she wasn't quite sure why she was smiling slightly as she pulled her journal over and opened it to the most recent page of her Hero story, but she found that she didn't mind. Bending over her pencil, she lost herself in her characters for most of the morning.

*His stare was deep and compelling, forcing her to remember that Kiss almost against her will. Her pulse began to pound against her temples, and she felt dizzy. Would he kiss her again? Would it evoke the same heat, the same longing?*

*"Oh my dear, my precious one. I have loved you for years beyond counting. I know not when I first looked into your lovely eyes and fell, seeing the real you, but it was soon after we met. You ceased to be merely a friend, and became the woman I would marry."*

*Her breath caught when he grabbed her hands, and then exploded out of her in a sound that was half-sob and half-laugh. How had he known? How had he known her exact feeling? "Oh! I have loved you for just as long! Longer, even. From the moment I saw you, I knew that you were the most wonderful man in the world!"*

*Crushing her to his wide chest, his voice rumbling against her ear, he whispered, "Marry me, my love. Stand by my side forever."*

Wendy smiled wryly and put down the pencil. Removing her spectacles, she rubbed the bridge of her nose and sighed. The beauty of being a writer was that she could create scenarios completely

removed from reality. Her Hero and Heroine might love one another, but she had only Serena's claim that Nate loved her, since he'd never said anything outright to her. Her story and real life had diverged. Marriage wasn't in the future for Nate and her... he'd never indicated that he had any interest. They were friends, and deep friendship often seemed like love.

But in the back of her mind was a little voice telling her that "friends" didn't kiss each other the way Nate had kissed her, and didn't make her feel the way he did.

Nate's kisses were... special. Magical? When she was in his arms, she felt complete. She felt like he made her whole again. No other kiss—no other experience in her years since she left Cheyenne—had made her feel that way. Nothing else had ever felt so right.

Steven's kisses had made her feel hot and excited, and desirable. That had been important to the girl she'd been; the girl who'd spent two years in the big city, staring wide-eyed at the decadence around her. He'd swept in, debonair and smooth, and she'd been desperate for a friend. But he'd wanted more than friendship, and it hadn't taken long for his smiles and teasing to turn to kisses and caresses. And she'd been completely enthralled by the way he made her feel, the way her body responded to him.

It hadn't taken long for him to invite himself into her bed. She'd been shocked at first, but he'd made her feel so good, and her objections had thawed in the heat of his onslaughts. She'd welcomed him into her arms and bed and had been overwhelmed by his passion.

After all, he was the perfect gentleman, and the perfect match for a young lady like her. She had been sure that a marriage proposal would be forthcoming.

But as the weeks turned into months, and Steven hadn't mentioned anything about the future while continuing to come to her bed as often as possible... Wendy began to have her doubts. One evening she confronted him, while he was redressing, leaving her reclined on the bed like a satiated nymph. But when she'd mentioned marriage, he'd laughed.

"Marry you? Oh sweet, simple Wendy." Suddenly, his smile hadn't seemed quite so suave anymore, and Wendy had sat up, pulling the sheets up to her chest as a sort of protection. "I'm the Blakely heir, and you're a tutor." He crossed quickly and lifted her chin for a quick, hard kiss. "I'm engaged to father's partner's daughter. We're going to be married and build a business empire, apparently." Wendy had tried to focus on his smile, but it was hard past the pounding in her ears. He was to be married to someone else, and he'd known it the whole time.

Still smiling, Steven had sauntered to the door of her small

room. "That's not to say that I haven't thoroughly enjoyed the last weeks, Wendy. You're a delightful romp in the sack, as they say." He'd winked then, and the part of her that could still think had been mortified that he'd relegated everything that they'd shared to a mere "romp in the sack". Lowered *her* to a "romp".

"You're engaged?" Her voice had sounded weak, even to her.

"You're surprised? I don't see why. Everyone in the family knows it. One of these years I'll even get around to marrying the girl, I suppose. In the meantime," He'd blown her a kiss, and she didn't even try to hide her disgust, "I take my amusements where I can, and you were *very* amusing, Wendy."

*Oh God.* He'd been engaged the entire time. He'd had no interest in her as a potential wife, had no intent of asking for her. Steven had just been toying with her, and she'd gone along to her own ruin happily, with open arms.

Wendy had claimed an illness the following day, and stayed in her room. She'd done a lot of thinking, and vowed that she'd deny Steven the next time he approached her. It had been hard, to turn him away, especially since he knew her body so well. He'd known exactly where to kiss her to make her whimper, but she had been strong and turned him away. And the next time, too.

But then the fates conspired to take matters out of her hands, and she could no longer avoid him. She had to see him.

It was the results of that final, devastating confrontation that meant that she was no longer a fit wife for anyone. No longer worthy of a man as good as Nate.

Optimistic about her future? Wendy sighed. She would never be able to be truly happy; her naiveté and stubbornness assured that. She would never have the loving husband and joyful home her sister had... but maybe now that she was here, she'd be able to put her mistakes behind her. She could focus on her writing, and live a quiet life, peaceful and alone.

She tried not to think about how empty that made her feel inside.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Wendy opened the door to his knock this time. He knew the Carderocks had their own servants, but maybe both of them were busy elsewhere. Or maybe she'd been waiting by the door for him to arrive. Or maybe pigs could fly.

"Hi Nate." That sweet little smile, half shy, half hopeful, made him ache.

"Hi Wendy."

And just like that, things were simple again, like they used to be.

Her hand was still on the door, and he watched as she rested her cheek against her fingers and looked him up and down, like she was thinking about something else. "You're wearing your normal clothes again."

She'd noticed? "Yeah. It seemed appropriate, being back home and all." She still looked like a refined lady who belonged in a city like Cheyenne.

Apparently noticing that they were standing there with the door open, Wendy shook herself slightly. "Come in. Everyone's in the parlor. Luncheon will be soon."

He slipped past her, pulling off his hat as he did so. She didn't back away to give him room, and he liked that. They ended up standing in the foyer, dark after the glare of the sun outside, inches apart. "You looked silly in that bowler hat, anyhow." Her whisper made him smile.

"Oh yeah?" He whispered back around his grin. "You didn't think to mention that before I paraded all over town in it?"

Her pink tongue darted out to sweep unconsciously over her lips, and Nate stifled a groan at her accidental sexiness. "No, you fit in there. You looked like you belonged." She reached up and brushed a finger against his shorn hair, lying flat against the back of his ears now. "But it wasn't you."

He swallowed heavily, surprised to be having this conversation here, and now. "I never fit in, Wendy. I was always an outsider."

This time her smile was sad, as she laid her palm against his



cheek. "Thank you for trying for my sake, though." His hands ached to grab her, to press her to him, but he just clutched the brim of his hat harder, forcing himself to stay still. "Promise me that you'll grow it out again?"

"My hair?"

A nod. "It's part of who you are, Nate. I don't want you changing."

"Not even for you?"

Her hand dropped and she looked away. Her voice was harsh, choked when she answered, "Especially not for me."

He couldn't stop himself from grabbing her hand and forcing her to look at him. "You're worth changing for, Wendy." There were tears in her eyes, and he hated them. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I acted like... like a savage."

"That's not why I was angry."

"I know, I think." He took a deep breath when she looked away again. "You are so strong, so brave, and had made yourself a life all by yourself, and I took that away. I'm not sorry you had to come back home, but I am sorry I caused you so much hurt."

She nodded, woodenly. "Thank you for understanding."

"That's what friends are for."

She glanced back at him. "Is that what we are? Friends?"

"Forever, Wendy. But..." He was gripping her hand now, like a lifeline, desperate to get it said, and terrified that if he let go, if he held her the way he wanted to, it would push her away. "But more, too. We could be more..."

The door from the parlor burst open then, and Serena pulled Sebastian through, laughing gaily. There was brightness and cheer and sparkly decorations in the room behind them, and it spilled into the foyer in their wake. "Luncheon is ready, you two! Stop sulking out here and come celebrate! It's Christmas Eeeeeee—!"

Serena's cajoling turned to a squeal as her husband pulled her beneath the mistletoe hanging from the chandelier, and kissed her soundly. Nate grinned at their enthusiasm, and soon Agnes was heckling the pair. "Honestly, boy, let her come up for air!"

Sebastian did, and even Nate had to admit that Serena looked disoriented when she patted her bun back into place. Her husband glanced up at the chandelier and grinned. "I knew buying all of those bunches was a good idea."

"For you, maybe!" Agatha poked him in the chest as she swept past on her way to the dining room. "But the rest of us have almost lost our breakfasts from the disgusting noises you two keep making under them. One in every room, honestly..."

Her sister grinned as she followed. "She's just jealous that Ian's

not here.” Nate was jealous too. He was already wondering if he could maneuver Wendy under one of the bunches of mistletoe Sebastian had obviously spread around the house. “...And if she *did* lose her breakfast, she’d eat a double portion of luncheon.”

The last part was louder than necessary, to ensure that Agatha heard. The door swung shut behind Agnes as Nate heard a “Well, I *never*” from her sister in the dining room.

Serena giggled, and placed a quick kiss on Sebastian’s cheek. “I like them, husband.”

“I know.” His smile was satisfied, and proud. Annie snorted and rolled her eyes, and they all chuckled. After the others had started for the dining room, Nate shrugged out of his duster and scarf, leaving them on a back of a chair, and offered his arm to Wendy. She placed her hand on it, and he wanted her to press against him, like they did in St. Louis. But for now, this would do. He led her into luncheon.

The meal was... fun. Even Wendy laughed at Serena’s aunts’ antics and teasing, and they all shared memories of past Christmases. With Nate, Wendy and Annie all there, naturally discussion turned to celebrations at the Barker ranch. They all enjoyed regaling their hosts with stories of Christmases snowed in together, and that one unseasonably warm year where the snowmelt turned everything to slushy mud, and their traditions. Sebastian told them all about celebrations in New York City, and Wendy even shared some descriptions of decorations and parades in St. Louis. The rest of them hung on the accounts of holidays in the big cities.

After the meal, they moved in a group to the front parlor, where the last, largest Christmas tree waited untrimmed. Apparently it was a tradition in Sebastian’s family to wait until Christmas Eve to decorate the tree, and while Serena couldn’t wait that long for the rest of the decorations, she consented to leave *one* tree undecorated. Nate had to admit that it was a nice tradition, to ensure that the tree and the garland lasted until the twelfth day of Christmas. And being with the larger group, swapping jokes and sharing treats, reminded him of Christmases with Molly and Ash... and Wendy.

Glancing at where she stood, helping her sister position tiny perfect candles in tiny perfect tin angels to clip to the branches, he realized how thankful he was to be able to spend another Christmas with her. And how much he wanted to spend more Christmases with her... all of them.

The thought of marrying Wendy, and getting to spend the rest of his life with her, made him feel... well, it made his chest tight and his stomach flop and his spirits soar. He loved her, and wanted to experience all of life with her.

Just thinking of having her forever made Nate smile, and he

snagged her hand the next time she brushed past him on her way to the pile of ornaments. Ignoring her sound of confusion, he pulled her towards the door and out into the foyer, drawing to a halt under the bunch of mistletoe hanging from the chandelier. Then he swung her around into his arms, and decided that he loved the way her brows drew together that way when she was irritated.

“What are you doing?” She hissed at him, trying to twist around to see if their hosts had noticed their absence.

“Are you still mad at me, Wendy?”

“What? Yes! I was busy! Let me go.”

“No.” He dropped a quick kiss to her lips, and that shut her up. He pulled back before either could start enjoying it, but now she looked confused rather than upset. “I meant, are you still angry at me for getting you kicked out of the Blakelys’ house, and losing your job, and making you come back to Cheyenne?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Yes.”

“Hmmm.” He dropped another kiss on her lips. “What if we separate those things?”

“What?”

“Are you still angry that I lost you your job and your place to stay?”

“Yes...”

“And are you angry that you had to come back home?”

He saw her lips forming the word ‘yes’, and decided not to give her the chance to lie. He kissed her then, like he’d wanted to for days, like he had on the Blakelys’ front porch last Friday. He kissed her like a man kisses a woman he’d been dreaming about for years. And he felt it, clear down into his stomach.

Dear God, he loved this woman.

When he finally let her breathe, she clung to him, and he was proud of that fact. And as soon as he could get his own breath and knees under control, he might crow about that a bit. But for now, he just gazed down at her, hoping that she saw everything that he was feeling in his eyes.

“Why did you do that, Nate?”

Leave it to Wendy get ask questions at a time like this. She pushed her spectacles back up her nose, and peered seriously at him. He sighed

“Because you were going to tell me that you were angry that you were here.”

“I forgive you.”

It wasn’t *I’m not angry*, but even better.

“For everything?”

She shrugged. “Why did you kiss me?”

Still holding her, he pointed one long finger upwards, and liked the way she had to tilt her head back to see around him.

“Oh. Mistletoe.”

“Handy little plant, huh?”

“I always wondered why Molly hung some over the back door.”

“I spent the last two Christmases you were home trying to figure out ways to lure you back there.”

His confession shocked her. Hell, it shocked him. Those had been stupid dreams, back when he was sure she saw him as nothing more than a friend. “Really? You wanted to...?”

“Kiss you? Sure, Wendy.” Her eyes were wide behind the glasses, and he resisted the urge to kiss her again. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for...” He shifted awkwardly, embarrassed to be telling her his secret. “Well, since I met you. Do you remember when I first saw you?”

“In the train station. I didn’t believe you were Ash’s brother.”

“And I thought you were about the prettiest thing I’d ever seen in my life.”

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Her brows were drawn in now, confused and worried. He tightened his grip on her, but didn’t let himself kiss her again. He had to get this said.

“I knew from that first Christmas that I’d never be worthy of you, Wendy. You were smart and beautiful and kind and funny, and deserved someone so much better than me. But I couldn’t make myself care about that, and I... I fell in love with you that year. And the next. And... I’d never had a friend like you, Wendy, and you’ve meant more to me that you could imagine. I’ve been dreaming of kissing you for eight years.”

She was pale now, and suddenly he was concerned she might faint, even though she’d never fainted before in her life. “I’ve loved you for years, Wendy, and I don’t care that you deserve more. I want to be with you. I want to spend the rest of my life trying to make you happy.”

She let out a noise that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob, and tried to push away from him, but he wouldn’t let her. Holding her against him, he tried not to feel like she was rejecting him and his love. She stopped struggling and rested her cheek against his shoulder, and while he liked having her there, he wished he could see her expression.

“You’re wrong, Nate.”

“Wrong that I love you? How do you know?”

“Wrong that you’re not worthy of me. Wrong that I deserve more. I could never in a million years deserve someone as kind and strong and honorable as you. I’ve...” her voice cracked. “I’ve lost my

chance at happiness, Nate.”

He cursed, and putting his hand under her chin, lifted her mouth to his. He let all of his frustration and longing and love pour into the kiss, and felt her melt under him. Her hands twisted into his shirt-front, and he smiled against her lips when he felt her tongue match his in their frantic dance.

It was a long time before they pulled apart, breathless. He dropped his forehead to hers, and inhaled her scent. “*You’re* wrong, Wendy. I love you, and you’ll always be the only woman for me.” She shuddered in his arms, but he tightened his hold. “And don’t deny it. You feel it too, don’t you?”

Her eyes were squeezed tightly, but she didn’t pull away. “Nate, I... For so long...” She took a shaky breath. “You deserve...”

“Don’t.” He didn’t care that his voice was harsh, or that this was no way to confess his heart. “I *love* you. I love *you*.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I have *never* known another person the way I know you. No matter what you think makes you unworthy of me, you’re wrong.”

“You don’t know...”

“So tell me, Wendy.” He nudged her head back so that he could see her eyes, watery behind the glass. “Tell me what you’re hiding.”

“I can’t...”

“Tell me, Wendy, so that I can explain how it doesn’t matter. So I can convince you that I love you. So that we can be happy.”

This time her tears fell, and when she sobbed, “Please!” and pushed away, he let her go. And turning to watch her flee up the stairs, he wondered if he’d just lost his chance at happiness after all.

*Magic of the season? Bullshit.*



As much as Wendy wanted to spend the rest of the day—the rest of her visit—hiding in the room Serena had given her, she knew that she couldn’t. And as much as she wanted to avoid Nate, she knew that was impossible too. This was Christmas Eve, after all, and the rest of their family would be here soon, and she was looking forward to seeing *them*. Nate was the one she didn’t want to face.

He loved her? How could he do that to her? Say something so achingly beautiful, when she knew there was no hope for them? He practically begged her to tell him her secret... but if he knew, he wouldn’t love her. By giving him what he asked for—her trust—she would lose what she most wanted—his love.

She wanted him, had always wanted him, just as he was. Her perfect man, perfect Hero. And now to discover that he wanted *her*, and wanted to find happiness with her... she should be ecstatic. But to find that happiness, he wanted—he deserved—her trust.

He was making her choose between telling him—trusting him—and watching him lose his regard for her, or not telling him and watching him lose his trust. No matter what she did, she'd lose his love, so soon after finding it. No matter what she did, she would lose him, lose her chance at happiness.

It was almost cruel, to find out *now* that he loved her.

But it really wasn't a choice. Sighing, Wendy knew that there was really only one thing she could do; she had to tell him the truth. He asked her, and he deserved to know. Perhaps, had she not experienced his kiss, his touch, had not realized that the regard she'd always felt for him was actually love... perhaps she could have avoided telling him. But not now. She loved him, and he deserved to know her secret.

And after he knew, and grew distant and awkward—as surely he would—she could go back to St. Louis and try to start a new life.

Wendy had no idea how long she sat in her room, staring out the window, but the sun was lower in the sky when there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer, her little sister slipped through and crossed to the bed. Plopping herself down, Annie raised a brow in Wendy's direction.

*\*Nate has been sulking in the kitchen.\**

When they were younger, she and Serena and Annie had spent hours sitting in the girls' room, silently signing all sorts of secrets to one another. It was almost a relief not to focus on her lips while she spoke, and imagined that's why Annie preferred it. *\*Sulking?\**

Her little sister shrugged and pulled one leg up under her.

*\*Hiding then. What did you say to him?\**

Wendy looked away, unwilling to answer. Annie snapped to get her attention, and when she glanced back, the girl signed *\*What did he say to you?\**

Sighing, Wendy lifted her hands hesitantly. *\*Did you...\** She tried again. *\*Did you know that he loved me?\**

Annie's face fell, and Wendy hated the pity she saw in her little sister's eyes. *\*Yes. Everyone did. It's hard to remember before you left...\** Great, as if she wasn't feeling guilty enough. *\*But even then, I knew he loved you. I think he always has.\**

*\*I didn't know.\**

*\*Why do you think he's been so miserable while you've been gone?\**

"I don't know! I didn't know!" Oh God, she had *that* sin to add to her ledger now, didn't she? She'd made him miserable, and she

should have guessed, judging from his letters.

But Annie wasn't there to judge her; the girl just unfolded herself from the bed and crossed to her sister, giving her a hug. It was what Wendy needed, and she leaned into her sister's embrace, taking strength from the smaller girl's love.

"I'm sorry, Annie."

Annie pulled back slightly, so that she could see Wendy's lips. Knowing the girl had felt her speak, but hadn't heard, Wendy repeated herself. "I'm sorry, Annie. I'm sorry I put you all through this. I'm sorry I put... *him* though this."

Her sister nodded solemnly, and bent to place a kiss on Wendy's forehead. The woman shivered slightly, remembering their long-dead mother's touch. Maybe all she needed was acceptance, now. "Ah forgif oo. One day, oo will tell us why?"

"Why I've hurt you all?"

"Nahte most of all."

Two tears trickled down Wendy's cheeks, but she didn't turn away. She didn't have to; her baby sister wiped them away for her. "Yes. One day, I promise I will, Annie."

"And Nahte?"

"I love him, Annie."

"Ah know. He does not know."

She had to tell him. She had to tell him everything.

The thought of confessing her feelings for him, and her dark secret, made her nauseated with dread. How could she do it, today of all days? Christmas was the season of joy and thanksgiving, not the season of tears and trepidation.

But was a small voice in the back of her mind that reminded her that Christmas was also the time of forgiveness.

Maybe, just maybe, telling Nate the truth wouldn't push him away. Maybe he cared for her enough to forgive her. Maybe their shared past, and their feelings for each other, were enough to overcome her sins.

Maybe she'd finally get a Christmas miracle.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Apparently his brother wasn't going to make it that night. Sebastian had warned Nate that Ash was planning on coming into town late, and probably would get to the Selkirk home after dark. Nate knew that he'd see Ash and Molls and the kids tomorrow, and was glad of it. As much as he wanted to see his brother, and get some advice, he knew he wasn't fit company for anyone right now.

Wendy hadn't come back down since that kiss, despite Annie going up to see her. The girl had come back downstairs a while later, and just shook her head at Nate's silent question. He'd cursed and kicked the bannister then, which had earned him a severe look from Agnes... or maybe Agatha. He still couldn't tell them apart.

The MacLeods had arrived about an hour ago, right before the sun set, and everyone had congregated in the large front parlor to await dinner. The mood was festive and jolly, which just made Nate's brooding worse. The little ones were being *oooh'd* and *ahhhh'd* over by the ladies, and Ian was having trouble maintaining his usual scowl while being teased by Agatha. Even Nate had to admit that it was pretty funny to see such a stern old man blushing from an old lady's whispers.

By some unspoken consent, the Carderocks and Selkirks were ignoring him, leaving Nate to wallow in his own sulk. He slouched in one of the armchairs in the corner of the room farthest from the tree, an untouched glass of whiskey by his right hand. As much drinking as he'd done over the last three years to try to forget Wendy, tonight wasn't the time. Tonight, he didn't need to forget her. He needed to figure out how to get her to trust him. To trust him enough to tell her secret, so they could solve whatever problems faced them and get on with their lives.

He couldn't ask her to marry him without being able to assure her that they *could* be happy together... and he couldn't do that until he knew what she was hiding.

Dammit, he really wished his brother was here now. Not that he'd spill it all out to Ash, but just knowing his big brother understood him would have been helpful. But he'd probably put in a full day's



work with the horses, and without Nate or Annie there to help, it had probably taken until almost dark, which meant that they were still a few hours away.

Of course, dark came early this time of year, but the days were getting longer again, which was something to look forward to. Nate snorted when he realized that Wendy had been the one to teach him all about solstices, and remembered the summer they'd stayed up every night for a week to track the stars in the sky. He owed so much to her, had *learned* so much from her, that it felt impossible to repay her. To be worthy of her.

"Everyone's avoiding you, you know."

Nate turned from the window to see Cam making himself comfortable on the chair beside him. "That's because I'm sulking, and they're kind enough to leave me in peace."

"Not me." Cam's cheerful grin was almost enough to make Nate smile.

Instead, he growled. "You're not a very good friend, are you?"

"The very best. Now, tell me why you're sulking—you're not even drunk, are you?—so I can tell Jacob to come say hi. He talked about 'Uncle Nate' for most—nope, pretty much *all*—of the trip into town."

Nate's lips curled up at that image. Cam's step-son had adopted Nate as his uncle after he'd heard Noah and Pete use the name. "I'm not going to apologize for you having to listen to your own kid chatter. I'm miserable enough already."

"I figured misery loves company, so I'd make you feel sorry for me."

Leave it to Cam to make him chuckle, even feeling the way he did. "Did Serena send you over here?"

"Nope, she's been so busy with Tess that she hasn't said three words to me since we got here."

Sure enough, the two petite women were sitting beside the tree on a chaise, their heads together, whispering about something intently. "Any idea what they're talking about?"

"Nate, if I had any clue what women talked about when they were together, I'd write a book and get rich."

Dammit, another chuckle. "You're making it hard to maintain this sulk, you know."

"Yep," Cam said cheerfully, watching Agnes hand baby Mae to Sebastian. "I know. So now that you're smiling again, I can get to the cause of this pout."

"I'm sulking, not pouting."

"Irrelevant." Reaching across the table, Cam snagged Nate's glass of whiskey, and took a sip for himself. "So, you brought Wendy

back, huh?" Nate didn't reply. "Where is she?"

"Hiding in her room. If she's not down by dinner, I'll go get her myself."

"Good. I'm looking forward to introducing her to Tess."

"Yeah, well, she doesn't want anything to do with me, so she'll probably—"

The dinner bell cut him off, and Wendy stepped through the door. "Brixley sent me to tell you all that dinner is ready."

Amid the general clamor and exodus, Nate could only stare. Damn, she didn't even look like she'd been upset. And when she met his eyes across the room and smiled slightly, he got even more confused. What was she thinking? Was she just playing with him?

"Well." Cam put down the whiskey and stood, offering Nate a hand. He pulled his friend to his feet and clasped a large palm to the smaller man's shoulder. "Looks like you were wrong."

"Yeah." Nate shrugged. "But like you said, if any of us knew what went on in a woman's head, we'd be rich."

Cam's booming laugh made it suddenly feel like Christmas Eve. Nate was surrounded by his friends, he was about to sit down to a good meal with plenty of laughter, and the woman he loved had smiled at him. Guess some of that magic of the season had finally worked.

Dinner was real nice, everything a Christmas Eve meal should be. Jacob was so excited about St. Nicholas's visit that he could barely sit still, and Cam had to keep reminding him to stop chattering and eat. Little Mae could sit on her own, but was happy to be passed around. Even Nate enjoyed bouncing her on his knee and seeing her gummy smiles. Wendy rocked Mae 'til she fell asleep, and Nate had to admit that she looked mighty fetching with a baby in her arms. They shared a smile across the table, and his heart felt lighter because of it.

Everyone had been right about Wendy finding Tess fascinating. The two women sat next to each other; Wendy insisted on hearing all about Tess's father's Chinese culture and her adventures in Montana. Sebastian and Cam sat at the head of the table and talked business—occasionally asking Nate's opinion on a piece of property or expansion option—and Annie sat at the other end with the Selkirk ladies and Ian. They all had a grand time trying to outdo each other with stories and jokes, and Nate felt... at peace. Like he was right where he belonged, surrounded by people who knew and accepted him for who he was, and didn't expect him to pretend to be too civilized.

After the meal, the older ladies got ready to walk back to their home, on the next block. Tess and Cam gathered their children, and amid much teasing about St. Nicholas and his presents, said their goodnights and made their way upstairs. Nate helped Agnes with her

coat, and then offered to walk her home.

"Don't be silly, boy, there's no need for you to be cold. Ian will walk us."

"No offense, ma'am, but Ian's..." He trailed off, not sure how to politely say that Ian and Agatha were in a world by themselves, with their giggling and cooing.

Serena, laughing, came to his rescue. "Ian's a little distracted, Aunt Agnes!"

Chuckling now, Agnes allowed him take her arm, and after another round of good-byes and promises to be back before breakfast tomorrow, ventured out onto the sidewalk. It was cold, but no worse than other Decembers in Cheyenne, and they were soon at the Selkirk house. Nate wouldn't have bothered to even go in, but he saw his brother had arrived and was waiting in the parlor. Clearly surprised to see him, Ash stood and hailed him in a whisper.

Respectfully bidding the Selkirks goodnight, Nate and Ash met in the foyer and embraced. Nate took comfort in his brother's bone-crushing hug, as always. "Welcome home, little brother."

"Thanks, Ash. It's nice to be back."

"Brixley told us that you brought Wendy, too?"

"Yeah, she's staying with Serena."

"Molly was so happy she almost cried. She's upstairs with the kids now." Which answered Nate's unspoken question, and also explained why they were whispering.

Ash stepped back and crossed his arms over his huge chest, and stared at his brother. After a long moment, he made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a sigh. "You wanna talk about it?"

Leave it to Ash to figure there was something wrong, but not push. Nate sighed, and pulling his hat off in one hand, ran the other through his hair. "Not yet. Not sure there's much to say. She's here, but..."

"Neither one of you is happy about it."

"...Yet."

Ash just raised one brow. "Optimism?"

"Let's just say I'm not ready to give up."

He knew his brother well enough to see the slow smile curving under that beard. "Well, alright then." Ash stuck out his hand, and Nate shook it heartily. "Good luck, little brother."

"Thanks." Nate shoved his hat back on his head. "I'm heading back to Sebastian's place, just in case Wendy has a sudden and uncontrollable need to explain why she hasn't gotten around to loving me yet."

Ash's chuckle was deep, and somehow comforting. "See you tomorrow morning, kid. Merry Christmas."

“Merry Christmas.”

When he reached the Carderock home—Ian had opted to stay with Agatha, and Nate tried not to wonder where he was sleeping—Nate slipped quietly through the front door and locked it behind himself. The house was dark and quiet, although he occasionally heard a hushed voice from behind a closed door, or a creak of a floorboard as people moved around upstairs, getting ready for bed. He had planned to sleep on one of the couches in the back parlor, but wasn't quite ready to turn in yet. Instead, he hung up his hat and coat, and made his way into the large parlor where they'd spent the afternoon.

The tree—the big one that they'd all decorated together—gleamed in the moonlight reflecting on the snow outside. Nate wondered if Serena had left the curtains open on all of these windows just to achieve that effect. None of the candles on the tree were lit, of course, but the number of glass and heirloom silver ornaments meant that the whole thing sparkled like the night sky. The entire world seemed to be still.

In the tranquil stillness of the night, it was easy to believe that the tree represented some sort of Christmas magic. It gleamed like it could wipe away sins and offer forgiveness and bring people together. Everything Nate wanted for Christmas this year.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?”

He exhaled, not even aware that he'd been holding his breath, and turned. Wendy was sitting in one of the chairs along the back wall, but stood and moved towards him. She stopped an arm's length away, and just like that, everything was right in the world.

He slowly smiled. “Yeah,” he drawled, “it is.”

“It's like... there's so much potential for the future, and peace, and...”

“...forgiveness.”

“Exactly.”

He reached for her then, and she didn't push away. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his back and pressed her cheek to his shoulder, like she belonged there. He felt the corner of her spectacles pressed against his collar, and wondered if they were hurting her. They stood in silence for what seemed like forever, until he could feel her heartbeat against his chest. Finally, he shifted, and kissed her forehead. “I'm sorry, Wendy.”

“For what?” Her whisper was soft enough that he only heard it because she was tucked up against his ear.

“For what I said today.”

“You're sorry for loving me?”

“Never.” Another kiss. “I'm sorry I pushed you. I'm sorry I

overwhelmed you by telling you my secret.”

“What secret?”

“That I’ve been in love with you for eight years.”

“Me too.”

She was sorry he loved her? Or had he misunderstood? Sharply, he drew back, to be able to see her face. “What?”

Sighing, she loosed him, and adjusted her spectacles. Nate had always thought it was one of her stalling tactics, something to do while she thought, and this time was no different. He clenched his fists, vowing to give her the time she needed.

Finally, staring out the window, Wendy exhaled. “I said ‘me too’.”

“As in...?”

“As in, I’ve been in love with you for eight years as well.” Nate didn’t dare breathe, afraid that if he did, this dream would shatter and he’d lose it all. She *loved* him? She loved him! “I just didn’t realize it. I mean... You were my friend, Nate, and always there for me. I knew I loved you, but I thought it was the same way I loved Ash, or Serena. But then...”

“Then you left.”

“I’ve spent years reading and writing romances, Nate. I was sure I knew what ‘True Love’ was. I’ve had to describe it often enough, Heaven knows.”

He snorted, still trying to keep himself from pulling her into another embrace. “Real life isn’t always like books, Wendy.”

“I know that now. But...” She took a deep breath. “Something happened in St. Louis. I...” She closed her eyes, like she was bracing herself. “I fell in love, and it was just like I’d always imagined.”

He’d always thought that someone’s “blood running cold” was something that only happened in books, but damned if it didn’t suddenly happen to him. He felt an iciness creep out of his chest and down his arms. He barely managed to croak out a strangled “What?”

“It wasn’t until later that I realized that kind of love was temporary, and burned too brightly. Real love was lasting and exasperating and comfortable and warm and everything I had with you. I just hadn’t realized that’s what it was.”

Nate tried to get his throat to work again. “*What?*”

She turned then, and he was sorry for his harshness. Behind the glass, her eyes seemed... scared almost. Which was stupid, because she was the strongest woman he knew. “I’m saying that what I feel for you is different from what I thought love was. It’s better. I love you, Nate Barker.”

He’d dreamed of hearing her say those same words, had waited years for them. But now, all he could think about was that *someone*

else. "Who else have you been in love with?" He didn't care that he sounded like a jealous kid. He needed to know.

Her chin came up then. "Oh, like you haven't been in love before? Like you've never touched another woman?"

His eyes narrowed, and he started to protest, but she cut him off. "Where did you sleep last night? No, you don't have to tell me, but it was... you were with a woman, weren't you?"

"I haven't *thought* about touching another woman since I found you again." And that was God's truth.

"Before then, though? You've been with other women?"

"I wasn't in love with them, Wendy. You said you fell in love in St. Louis. *Who else have you been in love with?*"

"I was wrong." When her shoulders slumped and she sunk down to perch on the edge of the couch, he felt like a jerk. "That wasn't love, Nate. That was... false words and flattery and naiveté and manipulation. Love requires both parties to care for the other. It isn't love if it's all one-sided. But of course I didn't *know* it was one-sided..."

She drew a deep breath and, straightening her back, fixed her gaze on the tree, rather than him. "I went to St. Louis thinking I knew what I wanted. Thinking I could live on my own with no one to help or care for me. I thought I knew what was best. And then... And then I realized that I was a fool, and I couldn't come home, and..." With a start, Nate realized that there were tear-tracks on her cheeks, and he was beside her before he felt himself move. "And I deserved every moment of my banishment."

He'd never seen another human being look as desolate as she did at that moment. Weeping, but refusing to crumple. She was too tough, too determined to let herself give into despair. Despite his frustration, Nate was gentle when he turned her chin, forcing her to see him. *Really* see him. "You think you were foolish for falling in love?"

"I do. I believed him!"

Ah. It was beginning to make sense. Some slick city bastard had oiled his way into her heart with his false promises, and Nate had a pretty good idea who it had been. "This was last summer? When you stopped writing me?"

"I thought..." She pulled away from him with a sigh, and pulling off her glasses, pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment. "I thought we were in love, and it would be better for you if I just dropped out of your life." It was like she couldn't look at him, and fixed her gaze on her lap, her back ramrod-straight. "But then I let myself be duped, and I was so ashamed, and I knew I couldn't bring that shame home to you and my family."

She wasn't the first woman to be tricked by a honeyed tongue and a handsome face. "It was Steven, wasn't it?" She stared down at her hands, fingers twisted around the metal frames. "I hated him from the first time I read his name, in your last letter. I didn't trust him."

"I was the one you couldn't trust, Nate." She took a shuddering breath, and two more tears dripped off her nose to land on her lap. "He was everything I thought a Hero should be, but he was the Villain, and I fell for his lies." He placed a hand on top of hers, and slowly twined his fingers through hers. He didn't know what to say.

Turning tear-filled eyes to him, Wendy said. "Do you understand why I begged you to stop, that night in the Blakelys' foyer? Because he was right."

It seemed to Nate that there was suddenly a thick band around his chest. It was hard to breathe. "Right about what?"

"Don't you see, Nate?" She swallowed, and pulled her hand from his. "I *am* a whore."

His mind went numb. Steven was a complete and utter bastard. He'd gotten off lightly when Nate beat him half to death; he deserved twice that. Nate wished he'd killed the son of a bitch when he'd had the chance. "He...?"

"He seduced me. I invited him to my bed." Wendy pinched the bridge of her nose again. "Whatever euphemism you want to use; *I had intercourse with him.*"

She sighed and dropped her hand again, and turned away from him. Her voice sounded strained, like she was striving for nonchalance and failing, when she confessed, "And I liked it. Very much, which is why it kept happening. I *was* a whore."

He wasn't sure what he should be feeling. He knew that he should be angry to hear her use that word about herself, but all he saw was the woman he loved in pain, and he wanted to comfort her.

"I thought he loved me, that he would marry me. But when I confronted him, he laughed, and told me that he was engaged already. I'd just been a... a *diversion* for him."

Ah. Now he knew how to feel. Anger, white-hot, coursed through him.

Nate cursed. And then, since it felt so good, he cursed again. Steven had turned her into a wh—no, he wouldn't say it. She was nothing like Eve, like his mother. He wondered if they'd been put on the path to prostitution by a handsome face spouting fake words of love, and cursed some more. He stood up and paced to the fireplace, still cursing, and kicked the hearth a few times. It didn't hurt enough to punch through his anger.

"I'm sorry, Nate. Now you see why..."

He swung on her then, no longer trying to keep his voice down.

"It doesn't matter, Wendy. Steven's lies don't change who you are."

"Oh, *no*. No." She looked down at her hands again, and suddenly, she looked so small. Not at all the strong woman he knew her to be. "That's not the worst of it." There was more? "That's not..." Her voice dropped to a whisper, "My shame."

Seeing her like this opened a pit of dread in Nate's stomach. "Wendy? You don't have to tell me."

"Don't you see, Nate? You told me that you love me, and you know that I love you. But you deserve to hear the worst of it." He gripped the mantel, willing himself to calm and listen. He did love her, and if he had any hope of convincing her that they belonged together, he had to hear this. He had to hear this, and then persuade her that it didn't matter.

She took a deep breath, but still didn't look at him. "About a week after I'd ended our assignment, I discovered that I... I was pregnant."

Thank God he was holding onto the mantel, because Nate's knees suddenly refused to support him. She had a *baby*?

"I confronted him, and he..." Her voice cracked. He watched her squeeze her eyes shut, and felt his heart break for her pain. "He told me it wasn't his problem. That I was a whore who'd gotten herself 'knocked up', and I was on my own."

Nate had thought that his anger had cooled, but he was wrong. He found himself considering how quickly he could be on a train heading east again. He'd happily endure another few days of rail travel if it meant being able to kill Steven with his bare hands. The man deserved it.

"I was so lost, Nate, so alone." She turned a tear-streaked face to him, and Nate broke.

He'd never seen Wendy like this; Wendy, who was normally so composed and brave. He'd never seen her so defeated, so empty. Without thinking, he jerked away from the mantel, and throwing himself in front of her, fell to his knees.

Gripping her hands, he managed a choked "I should have been there."

She touched his cheek, still crying. "You might have been there, had I told you. But I'd cut you off because I thought I knew best, and then I was too ashamed to tell you the truth... It was my own fault that I had to face this alone."

Just like his mother had faced her pregnancy alone.

"God, Wendy..." Nate pressed a kiss to her palm, and felt her fingers curl under his touch. "I'm so sorry."

"I prayed, Nate. I didn't want the baby. I didn't know what to do. I saw my life falling apart around me, and I didn't want that



future. I wished it away.” *Oh God*, if he could take this pain away from her, he would. He ached for her; what must it have been like for her, to face this catastrophe all alone? Nate gripped her hand harder, afraid that he was hurting her, but not wanting to let her go. Never wanting to let her go.

“I prayed it had never happened, and I’d wake up one day and I wouldn’t be pregnant.” Was this how his mother had felt when he’d been conceived?

She took another shudderingly deep breath, and looked straight into his soul. “And one day I woke up, and I wasn’t.” *What?* Nate didn’t understand at first, and Wendy continued. “I’d lost the baby. I hadn’t wanted it, *desperately* hadn’t wanted it, and now it was gone. I prayed for my baby’s death. And it worked.”

She’d lost the baby. She wasn’t pregnant, hadn’t birthed Steven’s bastard. How many other women had been in this exact situation, had prayed to be saved from a future of shame and scorn and poverty? Had his mother? Had his *own mother* prayed for his death, and been devastated when God hadn’t taken him from her?

Nate’s stomach heaved, and he suddenly felt light-headed. She’d lost the baby, and had a second chance at the life she was meant to live. But she’d gained that chance at the expense of a child so much like him that he ached. He ached for her pain, and her child, and his own mother.

His expression must have looked as nauseated as he felt, because she leaned towards him, as if trying to make him understand. “Do you see now, Nate? Why I couldn’t face my family, face you, after that?”

He found his voice. “You don’t honestly think you caused your baby’s” he managed not to choke out the word, “death by praying, do you? Hell, if that worked, I probably wouldn’t be here.”

Those gorgeous deep blue eyes widened, and he watched more sadness enter them. He winced, sorry that he’d compared himself to her child. “I’m sorry, Wendy. I shouldn’t have...”

“No.” She touched his cheek again, and he leaned into her palm with her free hand. “If I could have had a son half as noble, and honest, and smart and kind as you, Nate, I would have gladly had that child. And loved him, because I’ve known you.”

It was the sweetest, most thoughtful thing anyone had ever said to him. He wanted to tell her that, and as soon as he could make his throat work again, he would.

“I wasn’t thinking about that then, though. And I didn’t have anyone to talk to. All I knew was that I was blessedly reprieved, and could continue my life as I’d wanted, but at the expense of my baby’s life. He or she had to die so that I could go on being a ‘good girl’.”

Another shuddering breath, and she dropped her hand. Nate grabbed it as well, kneeling there before her like a suitor, desperate to make her feel better. "And I tried to. I didn't let anyone know my shame, and I read your letters and accepted the pain they caused as my penance. I hoped that if I lived a good life, a quiet life, perhaps I might be forgiven. And then you arrived."

"I'm not sorry, Wendy."

"You shouldn't be. Seeing you again, having you in my life after so long... it reminded me of what was important. It showed me that what I'd thought was True Love, what my characters felt for one another and what I thought I'd felt for Steven, wasn't real. *That* was lust. In real life, True Love doesn't hit you like a thunderbolt, or some other stupid analogy, when you see the other person. It takes time to build, to grow, to understand. It's what I've felt for you since we were children together."

Nate took a deep breath, the first—it seemed—since she'd started her confession. "Yeah."

"And because I love you, I needed to tell you everything. And I..." She shut her eyes. "I understand if you can't..."

"I love you, Wendy. Your past doesn't matter to me."

"It should." She pierced him with her perfect blue eyes again. "Because you're part of my past."

He swallowed. "I'd rather be part of your future."

"Oh, Nate." Untangling her fingers from his, she reached out and traced his brow, his hairline. He shuddered slightly as her light touch skimmed the tops of his ears and down his neck. "You're not allowed to say anything that wonderful, yet. You need time, time to think about and understand what I've just told you. Time to decide how you really feel about me."

He wrapped his arms around her middle then, pulling her towards him, and burying his face in her chest. She bent over his head, her arms wound around his neck. It might have been a sensual embrace, if it hadn't felt so desperate. When they were kids, they'd been able to give and receive comfort this easily, easily borrowing one another's strength as their own. And now, he tried to pour as much of his love, his passion, into this embrace, urging her to take it and make it her own.

Their odd tableau in that dark parlor, with the Christmas tree twinkling behind him, seemed to last for an eternity.

She *loved* him. She loved *him*. Right now, and in the future, that was all that mattered.

A bit muffled, he finally spoke. "Nothing you've said changes anything, Wendy."

She straightened a bit. "It should. It should change *everything*."

“Nothing you could say would change how I feel about you.”  
“It should.”

Pulling back far enough to see him, she placed one chaste kiss on his forehead. He wanted to pull her lips towards his and show her how he felt, but he refrained. He wanted to wipe out the memory of her past experiences with his own body, to teach her how beautiful things would be between them, to make her forget her pain and emptiness... but now wasn't the time. Now, she didn't believe him when he said that her confession hadn't affected his love.

He'd have to prove it to her.

Gripping her spectacles, she stood then, pushing him aside gently when he remained kneeling in front of the couch. Her hand rested on his head, playing softly with his hair like some erotic benediction, and he closed his eyes on the sensation. “Thank you, Nate.” He barely heard her whisper.

“For what?”

“For listening. You're the only person I've ever told. I knew it would be hard, but you...” He tilted his face towards hers, and she stroked one finger down her cheek. “I don't feel as empty, somehow. Thank you.”

*I love you, Wendy.* But his voice seemed to be stuck. All he could do was stare dumbly up at her and marvel at her strength.

“Goodnight, Nate.”

He found his voice. “Night, Wendy. Merry Christmas.”

Her lips curved into a smile then, welcome after so much despair. “Yes, it is, isn't it? I'm finally home for Christmas, with my loved ones. With my friends. With you.”

She was still smiling when she turned and slipped out of the parlor, and he listened to her footsteps on the stairs. It wasn't the happiest of smiles, but at least she was no longer crying.

Dropping his head to the crook of his elbow, Nate exhaled. How was he going to convince her that he still loved her? That her secret—what she saw as her shame—didn't matter to him? He ached for her pain, and desperately wanted to punish Steven for using and abandoning her. But that was her past, and he *had* to come up with a way to get her to think about her future. Their future together.

Well, he only had to look around the beautifully decorated parlor to remind himself that this was the season of miracles, the season of new beginnings. He needed a way to show her that together, they'd overcome their pasts, and sprawled there alone on the dark parlor rug, he had an idea that just might work.

The tree sparkled in the moonlight, and Nate remembered what he'd thought when he'd first come into the room. That the tree represented the hopes and possibilities and magic of the season.

Smiling slightly, he pulled himself up onto the couch, and flopped back to plan.

With a little help from some of that Christmas magic, maybe he'd be able to convince Wendy that she was worthy of his love.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



It was Christmas morning! Wendy smiled before she'd even opened her eyes, enjoying the satisfaction of stretching under the thick blankets. After they'd moved with Molly to Cheyenne, and had been able to celebrate holidays again, Christmas morning had become all about anticipation. Pete, and later baby Noah, had taught Wendy that savoring anticipation was impossible to children, so Christmas morning had begun earlier. For the last three years, though, Christmas morning had been cold and formal.

Today was going to be different.

Thinking about her family reminded Wendy that she would see them today. Maybe they were waiting for her right now! She scrambled out of the enveloping blankets, and steeled herself to face the cold air. Yesterday she would have said that she was dreading facing Molly again, knowing what pain she must have caused her sister. But last night, sharing her secret sin with Nate had been cathartic.

Wendy took a deep breath. For the first time in a long while, she didn't feel a knot of self-directed anger and white-hot shame sitting in the pit of her stomach. She felt empty, but also at peace. Like she'd been drained, and was ready to be filled up again, somehow. Had Nate done that for her? Had it been merely the act of telling someone, or was it something that he specifically had done? And after, after she'd told him everything, he seemed to still... care for her.

She hadn't lost his regard.

But did he still love her? *Could* he still love someone like her? Because, even though she'd thought it impossible, she loved him even more than she had yesterday. Seeing his pain on her behalf, and his willingness to lend her his strength, had shown Wendy that he was a wonderful man. He was a man who deserved a better person than her, but she didn't care; if he would have her, she'd spend the rest of her life trying to be worthy of his love.

Suddenly anxious to see him—and her family—again, Wendy hurried through her morning ablutions, fluffing her hair with her fingers and pinching her cheeks for color. She looked—and felt—wan,

but that was no surprise. It had been a stressful few weeks. It had been a stressful few years!

But she was home again, for Christmas.

There were noises coming from the front parlor, the room where she'd poured her heart out to Nate the night before. Swallowing, suddenly nervous, she pushed open the door, and saw her family for the first time in over three years.

"Aunt Wendy!" Pete saw her first, and she was surprised that he still recognized her. But he barreled towards her, and she hunched and caught the sturdy seven-year-old when he threw himself into her arms. She buried her face in his hair and inhaled. He reminded her of Jeremy, and of home. Her heart simultaneously ached for what she'd lost, and rejoiced for what she'd found.

"Happy Christmas, Peter."

"Happy Christmas, Aunt Wendy! St. Nicholas visited, you know! See, under the tree?" The boy squirmed out of her grasp to point, and just like that, brushed aside her homecoming as commonplace. Wendy straightened, and met the eyes of the tall woman across the room, clutching a smaller boy's hand.

Her breath caught in her throat. Had Molly always looked so much like their mother? Or had the last three years changed her so much? And why was she so blurry? Wendy checked that she was wearing her glasses, and realized with a start that she was crying.

And then her sister was there, in front of her, and they were both crying, and hugging, and laughing. "Oh, Wendy! Oh, Wendy" was all Molly could seem to say. For her part, Wendy just kept repeating "I'm so sorry" but it seemed to have no effect. Molly just laughed and hugged her harder.

Finally they pulled apart, oblivious to the bustle and excitement around them, and Molly captured Wendy's face between her hands, unconsciously mimicking Serena. "You're home, Wendy. You're back."

"I'm sorry it's taken me so long. I..." How to explain?

"*Shhhh.*" Molly smiled. "It's Christmas." She placed a kiss on Wendy's forehead, and it felt like a benediction. "One day, if you're willing, I'd like to know what happened in St. Louis. But if you don't ever feel like you can tell me, that will be alright too."

*Oh God.* It was like all of her worry over Molly's reaction just slipped away. Her sister had accepted her back into the fold, without even asking questions. Wendy's expression must have reflected her amazement, because Molly smiled again. "We love you, Wendy. You're home now, and that's all that matters."

Wendy's throat was tight. It was the homecoming she'd hoped for, but hadn't deserved. "I love you, Molly."

"Welcome home, Wendy." Her sister hugged her again. "Happy

Christmas!"

"Daddy, why is Mommy crying?"

Wendy saw a little boy—it had to be Noah, although he'd changed so much in three years—tugging on the hand of the largest man she'd ever known. Ash Barker was downright scary-looking to anyone who didn't know him. His friends and family, though, knew that his imposing bulk hid a gentle soul, and his bushy beard hid his lightning-fast smiles. She crossed to him, and he held out his arms for a hug, and she reveled in the way he almost crushed her. "Welcome back, Wendy. Good to have you home." His deep rumble enveloped her as much as the hug, and she smiled.

Pulling away, he tousled the brown curls of the boy beside him. "Noah, say hello to your Aunt Wendy."

She squatted in front of him, and smiled. "Hi Noah. You're much bigger than the last time I saw you."

"Lo Aunt Wendy." His mumble was adorable. He was obviously shyer than his older brother.

"Noah, I heard that you have a little sister. I've never met her." *Good Heavens*, how had she never met her only niece? "Could you introduce me to her?"

"Yep." Nodding matter-of-factly, Noah turned in a full circle, and then pointed. "Uncle Sebastian's got her. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Little Rose was almost two now, and the most beautiful bundle of wiggly energy Wendy could imagine. She spent a few heart-breakingly beautiful minutes playing with Rose and Noah, before their older brother reminded him that presents awaited them under the tree. Rose toddled after Noah, and Jacob squirmed his way out of his mother's hold to follow as well. Wendy rose to her feet, trying to keep the happy tears from falling.

Someone took her hand, and she glanced over to see Serena beside her. "They're lovely children, aren't they?"

Wendy squeezed her friend's hand, glad for her support. "I might be biased, but I think they're the most wonderful children in the world. I've met quite a few, you know."

Serena's laugh was a perfect little tinkle of bells. "I know. Me too. They're still some of my favorites."

"Thank you for having me here, Serena."

"Thank you for coming home, dear Wendy. More than anything in the world, I want you to experience the peace and hope that I've found. I found my place, here beside Sebastian, and I want you to find that."

"You found love." Wendy took a deep breath. "I'd like that." She glanced around the room, taking in her sisters signing to each

other, Ash speaking to Sebastian and Tess showing off May's new-found standing ability to the Selkirk aunts and Ian. They were all here, all ready to celebrate Christmas. But there was one face that was missing.

"He's not here." Wendy glanced back at Serena, who continued, "Nate's not here. I found a note this morning in the parlor that said he would be back after breakfast."

Exhaling, Wendy forced herself to loosen her grip on Serena's hand. She plastered a smile on her face, and said as brightly as she could manage, "Oh good. We'd better eat then, so he'll get here faster."

Her friend laughed, and then embraced her, and Wendy took peace in being able to hug her back. "Happy Christmas, dear friend."

"Happy Christmas, Serena."

Breakfast was a raucous, joyful affair, with so many people present. The children could barely keep still, and Cam and Molly seemed to take particular pleasure in teasing them about their waiting presents. Noah looked like he would burst from trying so hard to contain his excitement. There were many toasts and speeches by the adults, mainly as a way to prolong the little ones' torments, before Sebastian took pity on them and suggested they all adjourn to the parlor. Noah and Jacob almost knocked Agnes over in their rush to get there first.

Wendy was one of the stragglers, and almost missed the present-opening. The boys and Rose tore through their gifts so quickly, they might as well been racing. And little Mae wasn't to be outdone; she happily plopped herself down in the middle of things and tried to eat one of her brother's new shoes. All of the adults made themselves comfortable around the parlor, laughing and calling suggestions to the children about how to use their new toys and treats.

After a half-hour or so, Brixley and Sarah came in with mugs of hot cocoa, and were urged to stay to celebrate with them. Serena pulled the decorations off of the upright piano, Sebastian got out his violin, and the couple led their guests in carols. Cam and Ian kept changing the lyrics to keep them all laughing, and at one point, Ash swept Molly up in a quick polka to *Good King Wenceslas*.

Wendy had to admit that it was probably the most cheerful Christmas morning she could remember, even considering that first one with the Barkers. There was so much happiness and goodwill here, among these people. But she couldn't quite share their joy, because Nate wasn't there. Was he coming back? Had he thought about what she'd said last night, and decided that her past was too much? Had he realized that she wasn't worth loving?

As if her thoughts had conjured him, Nate stepped through the



parlor door. He must have just removed his hat and duster, because there was snow on his boots and his hair was messy. Usually it was too long to be messy, and she missed that.

He'd cut his hair off to fit into her world, but hadn't realized that her world was here.

Sebastian started another carol, but was hushed by his wife. Wendy couldn't seem to make herself look away from Nate, but she could feel everyone's eyes on them. She took a step towards him, and then another, and they met halfway across the room, under the small chandelier.

"Hi Nate."

"Hi Wendy."

"Last night—" She wasn't sure what she had been planning on saying to him, so it was just as well that he reached one hand behind her head then, and pulled her into one of his toe-curling, earth-shattering kisses. It was hard, and hot, and utterly delightful. *Merry Christmas, indeed*. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held on for dear life.

Wendy vaguely heard her sisters' cheering, and someone's whistle, and Cam's "Finally!" But she felt Nate grin against her lips, and she smiled in return. He placed another few kisses on the corner on her mouth, and then looked up.

She followed his gaze to the bunch of mistletoe dangling from the chandelier, and then met those twinkling green eyes. "I guess I owe Sebastian thanks for his mistletoe propagation."

"Yeah," he drawled in that slow, sexy way of his.

"I love you, Nate Barker."

"Good, because I love you. I know that you think things would change after what you told me, but they didn't." He stepped back, and ran one hand through his hair, messing it further. She resisted the urge to smooth it for him. "Wendy, life isn't like some romance novel. If this was a book, and this was the climax, I'd come swooping in here on a white horse with a bunch of roses or something. But it's not, and this isn't the climax. This isn't the end of our story. This is the beginning of forever, Wendy."

Her hands rose, unbidden, to her mouth to try to contain the sob that threatened. This was positively the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to her. He was right. Nate was her real-life Hero.

And then, there, in front of everyone, he dropped to one knee in front of her. "None of my horses are white, Wendy, and I couldn't find any roses in the middle of a Cheyenne Christmas." Oh God, what was happening? He'd reached into his pocket and opened his fist to reveal a small gold ring. "This is the best I can do, Wendy. Here, in front of our family and friends, I'm asking you to marry me. Make me

complete.”

Her legs refused to support her. She dropped to her knees, and he grabbed her arms. “Wendy? Are you okay?”

With hesitant fingers she touched the fist that she knew contained that little band of gold, and he opened his fingers. It gleamed like the Christmas tree. It gleamed like the promise of the future, like forgiveness and hope and love all rolled into one. She couldn’t seem to stop herself from stroking it.

He dropped to his haunches, joining her on the floor. “Sweetheart? Please say something.”

“You... you want to marry me? Still?” She hadn’t planned on sounding so pitiful, so awe-struck, but that’s how it came out.

“Love, I want nothing more in this life. You’re all I want for Christmas.” He lifted the gold band between a thumb and forefinger. “Please don’t say no.”

She reached for it then, and it seemed that he held his breath while she slipped it on her finger. It fit perfectly, like a dream. Or a novel, where the Hero always knew exactly what to do and say. She lifted her eyes to his, and saw the love there. This man, this wonderful, noble man, knew all of her secrets, her sins... and loved her in spite of them. He was her Hero.

“I’ll marry you, Nate. I’ve loved you for longer than I knew what love *was*. You’ve been my other half since the Christmas I met you. Without you, I was miserable. You complete me.”

He gripped her left hand, the one with the ring on it. “This is forever, Wendy. You might be here just for a visit, but if you think you’re going back to St. Louis without me, you’re—”

“No.” She swallowed. “You brought me home, where I belong. Where we *both* belong.”

She heard her sister’s “Oh thank goodness” just before Nate pulled her into another kiss, a joyful kiss. And she kissed him back, with all of the longing and wishes she’d felt for years.

When they pulled apart, their friends and family were cheering, and suddenly, Wendy *felt* like the Heroine in a book. Everything had worked out, magically, perfectly. She was going to marry the Hero. She was going to marry *Nate*, the man she loved.

It was a Christmas miracle.

Resting his forehead against hers, Nate whispered, “This is real life, Wendy. Not a novel. We’ve both been looking for—working towards—this moment, but this isn’t our ending. We’ve got years of challenges and joys ahead of us. Life isn’t always going to be easy, sweetheart, but it’ll be worth it, if we’ve got each other.”

She swallowed, and said the only thing she could say through the lump in her throat. “I love you.”

He held up her hand and looked at the ring. She had to admit that it looked nice against her skin. "I know this sort of thing only happens in books, but..."

She knew what he meant. She smiled. "Happily Ever After, Nate?"

"Happily Ever After."

## EPILOGUE



June, 1884

Molly sat on the front porch, enjoying a rare moment of not having anything to do. Ash always dragged her rocker out here in the spring, so that she could sit and enjoy the gorgeous view as she sewed, or peeled potatoes, or braided Rose's hair, or any of the million other small chores she could do sitting down.

It was moments like that, when she was hard at work, and looked up to see the sun glinting off the distant mountains, or heard her husband's strong voice calling to his horses, that she realized how lucky she'd been. Who would have guessed that a desperate journey here in '75 would have resulted in such peace? They'd had their share of hardships, but she and Ash were happy, and were raising three beautiful children.

She was watching those children now. The boys had stripped to the waist—although the Lord knew that Noah didn't need any excuse to take his clothes off—and were wrestling in the grass in front of the house. Rose, who refused to be separated from her brothers, even when their games didn't interest her, was sitting in the dirt nearby, making mud pies with a bucket of water from the well. Molly smiled at her daughter's intensity, wondering if she'd ever been so engrossed in dirt when she'd been that age.

A shout of laughter drew her attention to the large corral, where Ash, Nate and Annie were working with the new colts. Her husband lounged against the rail, his shirt unbuttoned in the heat, laughing while his brother and Annie—who were in charge of the breeding program and the colts, respectively—chased a particularly stubborn little filly around the enclosure. Molly knew that with the new contract for Mr. Green in St. Louis—they'd already sent the first batch of racers to St. Louis—the two of them were working hard to make sure the young horses were ready to be trained.

It was ingenious, the way the two of them communicated with each other and the horses through a series of signs and short, spoken phrases. Annie had taken to wearing jeans when she worked with the

horses and was speaking better than ever now. She had started to spend less time in Cheyenne at the school. Serena had offered to sponsor the girl—*young lady*, Wendy corrected herself—in her entrance into society, and Molly had left the decision up to her sister. While this denim-clad, dirt-smeared imp might not exactly fit into Serena's world, Molly didn't want Annie to have to choose between them. Surely there was a way for Annie to continue to work with the horses *and* receive the benefits Cheyenne civilization offered.

"It still amazes me that Annie can speak." Molly had been so intent on her youngest sister that she'd missed Wendy's arrival. "Sebastian is a wonderful teacher."

"Almost as good as you," Molly teased her sister.

The younger woman smiled slightly as she crossed the porch to stand beside Molly, watching the antics in the corral. She'd come from the direction of Nate's smaller house. Wendy spent most of her time there, writing, but the newlyweds still joined them for most meals. Wendy, for all of her love of neatness and order, couldn't cook worth a fig.

In the six months she'd been home, she'd written two more books to send to her publisher, and all the money she'd made she'd poured back into the ranch's funds. When Ash had protested, Wendy was matter-of-fact: "It's only fair. If you're going to support me while I follow my dream, the least I can do is pay for my own keep." Molly didn't mind cooking for one more person, and it was nice to have extra cash on hand.

She was probably the only one not surprised by Wendy's big announcement, when it was revealed that she'd become a successful author in St. Louis. Of course, Molly wasn't that big of a reader, but she'd borrowed a few of Nate's copies and tried Wendy's books, and had to admit that they were fun to read. Serena, on the other hand, had nearly fainted from the shock. Molly smiled to remember the younger woman's reaction: "*You? These books Nate keeps lending me are yours? You wrote them?*" It was like she hadn't believed Wendy the first three times she'd said 'yes'. She made up for her doubting her best friend by buying multiple copies of every single book by "W. Jones" for the Cheyenne Library.

Molly had been so busy reminiscing that she missed Wendy's departure. Her sister lifted her skirts—she was dressing more simply now that she lived on the ranch again, no more bustles—and skipped down the steps. Crossing the yard, she called out something to Pete that Molly couldn't hear, and continued towards the corral. Seeing her coming, Ash straightened and started ambling back towards the porch.

Molly's husband reached the porch and sat down on the top step, close enough that she could touch his sweat-plastered hair when

he removed his hat. He groaned theatrically and leaned into her touch, but she chuckled and moved her skirts out of the way. "Not until you bathe, mister!" and she saw him grin. She loved him year-round, but she especially liked when he shaved off his beard in the summer, and she could see that handsome dimple in his chin.

Together, they watched Nate sign something to Annie, and then join his wife at the rail to the corral. From here, Molly could see the love and happiness in the younger man's face, as he lifted Wendy's hand and kissed her palm. Wendy wrapped her fingers through his and climbed up on the fence beside him. They made a handsome pair, and Molly wondered what they were talking about.

"He sure seems content, huh?"

"I was just thinking that. He changed so much while she was gone." This carefree brother-in-law of hers had grown into a brooding and bitter man after Wendy went to St. Louis. She watched him start doubting himself, and become angry and defensive. Now that Wendy was his wife, they all saw more of the boy he'd once been; laughing, teasing, and content with who he was. Of course, he rarely went into Cheyenne these days; aside from the trip in February where they'd all gathered at Serena's house again for the wedding, he'd only gone back a few times. He was happy here. In love.

"Well." Ash lifted one dirty hand towards her, and Molly took it immediately. "Things change."

"Yes, they do, don't they?" She looked down at the large hand in hers, and remembered when they'd first met. Who would have thought they would journey this far together, that Christmas in Cheyenne when she'd met an angry Indian boy and tried to defend him from his older brother? Who would have guessed that Ash—the largest man she'd ever seen—could be so gentle and loving?

But this dirty hand in hers was the one that touched her so beautifully, that gripped hers when she needed strength, and that had cleaned their newborn children and placed them in her arms. This was the hand that would hold hers until their death, and if she was lucky, would be the last thing she'd touch in this life.

This wasn't the end of their story. It wasn't the end of Wendy and Nate's story, despite the hardships they'd overcome to make it this far. This wasn't the beginning either. Life was a journey, and the best anyone could hope for was finding love along the way.

Rising to his feet, Ash pulled her up as well. She went happily into his arms. "Mrs. Barker, your sons are trying to kill one another."

"Oh no," she said in mock sternness, "When they try to kill each other, they're *your* sons."

He dropped a kiss to her upturned lips, and she felt a burst of contentment. "Fair enough. Should we go rescue them?"

*Dear God*, she loved this man.

“They’d probably like the chance to wrestle with you for a change.”

He smiled. “Well, then, let’s go make our kids happy.”

They stepped off of the porch, continuing their journey... together.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

### *On Historical Accuracy*



As I mentioned in the historical notes in *A Cheyenne Thanksgiving*, setting a story in a city requires copious amounts of research. After all, this was a real place at a real time (December, 1883), and we can know what St. Louis was really like then.

Wendy's world is as accurate as I can make it. Pratte Avenue, Park Street, and Lafayette Square were the realm of wealthy St. Louisans in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Horse-drawn street cars and cabs carried residents across the bustling city to popular gathering places like Tower Grove Park, Forest Park, and Anthony Faust's Café and Oyster House on Broadway. And of course, no story set in St. Louis would be complete without mention of the Anheuser-Busch brewing empire and the rest of St. Louis's bustling industrial section.

St. Louis was known for its Fairs, the most famous of which was the World's Fair in 1904. They fed into the residents' desire for entertainment and public gathering spaces, and occurred yearly. The Fair Grounds Park became a popular spot, encompassing eighty-three acres of buildings, trails, the country's largest amphitheater, and a zoological garden. The yearly Fair and Veiled Prophet parade were a big draw, but Charles Green made the racetrack the most popular aspect of the park. It was the start of St. Louis's love affair with horse racing.

Just as Charles Green was a real person (although his contract with Nate is entirely fictionalized), many of the other secondary characters are real historic figures. While the Mulligans and the Blakelys are constructs, Wendy's original employer, Mr. Morgan, was real. He was the principal of the first "high" school in St. Louis, and the elocution he hired Wendy to teach really was part of the first-year course of study.

Wendy's publisher, Mr. Lee, was from the pages of history as well. Laird & Lee Publications was founded in 1883 in Chicago, and



was known for its dime novels. I like to imagine that Wendy, as “W. Jones”, was one of their first successful authors. I could have chosen a more famous publisher (Joseph Pulitzer was active in St. Louis at the time), but I couldn’t pass up the chance to boost William Henry Lee’s fame a bit. Lee bought out his partner in 1884, and when he died a very wealthy man in 1914, it was revealed that he was actually a light-skinned black man. This would have made him one of the first black publishers in America.

But my favorite secondary character in *A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming* is Nate’s landlady Mrs. Gardner, because of her colorful history. Elizabeth “Big Liz” Lewis Raglin was born in St. Louis in 1832, and was known for her beauty, singing ability, and preference for hard liquor. While traveling with her first husband in Salt Lake City, she met Archibald Gardner, a prominent man in the Mormon community. She divorced her husband and married Archibald, to become his tenth wife (although she “lacked the sterling quality of womanhood possessed by his other wives”, according to his biography). After about twenty five years without children of her own—although she did raise five of his children by another wife—she petitioned for a divorce and headed south with another man. Although some evidence points to her dying soon after, I like to imagine that she ended up back in St. Louis, enjoying her golden years while managing a boarding house. I got a kick out of researching her story, because Archibald Gardner is my children’s great-great-great-great-grandfather, and I’m fascinated by the women who married him.

Finally, I wanted to draw your attention to the train travel in the book. You may remember from *A Cheyenne Christmas* that Nate followed the railroad to Wyoming, as various lines pushed to link the cities of the American west. Well, sixteen years later they had succeeded, and it was possible to travel from St. Louis to Cheyenne in only a bit over two days. Nate and Wendy take the route via Omaha, with stops in towns all across Nebraska. The Pullman car that they sleep in was one of a fleet that were attached to most of the trains of that era, created and licensed by George Pullman himself. The porters in these cars were almost exclusively black men, and proudly answered to the nickname “George”. It was considered a respectable career in a time where former slaves were struggling to find their place in society.

Of the books in *The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet*, this one required the most difficult research. There is a wealth of information out there about the St. Louis of 1883, and I sifted through most of it. It was worth it, though, to capture the anticipation of the Christmas season in such an exciting time and place. I hope that you’ve enjoyed reading about it as much as I’ve enjoyed writing about it.



Keep reading for a sneak peek at Annie's Christmas romance!



They need each other to survive, but their families need a reason to celebrate...

## A Cheyenne Christmas

by Caroline Lee

[Click here to read how it all began.](#)



All she wants for Christmas is for him to hear the words she isn't saying.

## Where They Belong

by Caroline Lee

[Click here to read the latest Sweet Cheyenne Christmas story](#)

If you've enjoyed the history behind *A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming*, I urge you to find me on [Facebook](#) or follow me on [Twitter](#), where I frequently post fascinating pieces of social history that I find while researching. Do you like reading historical westerns,

and like hanging out with others who do too? Join us on the [Pioneer Hearts](#) Facebook page, where we have the most wonderful discussions, contests, and updates about new books!

I'm currently working on the [Everland Ever After](#) books, which are a series of re-imagined fairy tales set in the Old West. If you'd like to keep up with my stories, or read deleted scenes, or receive exclusive free books, sign up for my [newsletter](#).

[Reviews help other readers find books they'll love!](#)

All feedback is read and appreciated.



## From [Where They Belong: A Sweet Cheyenne Christmas Story](#)

New York City, December 1890

The big luggage cart very nearly ran her over.

She *might* have been gawking a bit, but that was to be expected; Grand Central Depot was huge. So much bigger than any of the train stations she'd been through to get here, and just incredible compared to Cheyenne's. Of course, Cheyenne's station was nothing like the covered platform it used to be, but it still couldn't rival this masterpiece of height and space and human ingenuity.

And the chaos! There were men in suits—real suits!—and little round hats hurrying back and forth, some with their noses buried in newspapers, and some gesturing animatedly to their companions. She could smell their sweat and taste their cigar smoke all around her. The men who worked for the railroad wore matching dark uniforms, and seemed content to ignore everyone as they waved and pointed and managed to organize the turmoil. There were even women; some unescorted like she was, some with families, and plenty with children. The acrid rush of steam from the far end of the Depot told Annie that a train had just whistled, and she could feel the pulse of the machine through her boots.

The Depot was so overwhelming, and no surprise that Annie didn't see the luggage cart the two porters pushed until it was almost too late. They'd probably been yelling at her to get out of the way,

which might have worked had Annie been able to hear them. She couldn't hear any of the shouts, the whistles, the calls and the humanity that she knew must be loud around her. The noise must've been even worse than the chaos, and she was almost glad to be deaf... but she wouldn't have minded hearing some warning of the approaching luggage cart.

But as it happened, she needn't have worried. Right as she turned into the path of the lumbering behemoth on wheels, and realized what was about to happen, a hand tightened around her wrist and yanked her out of danger. She smacked into a hard chest, her breath leaving her lungs in one great *whoosh* as warm arms wrapped around hers to steady her.

Barely a moment of contact, and then her mysterious rescuer stepped back and she saw his smile and knew he wasn't so mysterious after all. He was the one she was supposed to have been looking for, instead of standing there beside the platform gaping at the sights like the country bumpkin she was. Apparently, he'd found her instead.

"Glad I got to you in time, Miss Murray." The twinkle in his chocolate-brown eyes told her that his tone had been teasing. She'd lost the ability to hear at age three, after a bout with the German measles, but she'd always been good at understanding someone from their lip movement. Sebastian's oralism training had taught her to understand the sounds that those lips were making, and to attempt to reproduce them. She'd never heard herself speak, but could feel the sounds behind her ears.

"Hello, Reggie." The *R* sound was hard for her, and had driven Wendy nuts trying to explain it. Annie still wasn't sure if she'd mastered it, but Reggie's smile told her that it didn't matter.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Thank you." She swallowed, assuring herself that she wasn't lying to him. He was asking if she was okay after her near-miss with the luggage cart, which she was. She didn't have to confess that his smile made her knees weak—had for years—and that every time she inhaled she got a whiff of his appealing sandalwood scent.

Reggie stepped back, his hands lingering on her upper arms as if unsure that she was capable of standing on her own, and that more than anything made Annie's back straighten and her chin rise.

She'd just come across most of the country on her own, against her family's urging. She'd told them that she needed to prove that she could do it, and since she was a grown woman, they finally had to agree. There'd been close calls and misunderstandings along the way, but Annie had navigated her own way through the confusing transfers and negotiations, and by God, she'd made it—alone!—to New York City in one piece.

...Only to be nearly run down by a piece of equipment. Some of the starch went out of her shoulders then, and she ventured a small smile in his direction. "Thank you for rescuing me."

"It was my pleasure."

He smiled again, and Annie's breath caught. Oh goodness, he was... he was even handsomer than she remembered, but looked less like his older brother than he had during his last visit to Cheyenne. He was perfectly imperfect.

Reggie Carderock had Sebastian's dark hair, but it never managed to stay quite as well-coiffed as his brother's. Even now a lock had fallen across his forehead, and Annie wondered where his hat had gone. His grin pushed all thoughts aside, and she had to stiffen her knees to keep herself upright. There was a little gap between his front two teeth, and between that and the dimple in the opposite cheek from his brother, she thought him much more approachable. Touchable, even, although she'd never admitted that to anyone besides herself, and only then in the darkest part of the night when she only had her dreams for company.

And so her cheeks were burning when he offered her his arm, picked up her valise, and escorted her through the chaos and out into the slush of Vanderbilt Avenue, where a carriage waited. He helped her in, and then went to speak to the driver. Annie settled against the seat—much softer than the one she'd been sitting on for the last days—and watched his profile.

She'd met him nine years ago, at the marriage of her dear friend Serena to Sebastian, the oralist schoolteacher who'd come to Cheyenne to teach Annie. Reggie had stood beside his older brother at the altar, and Annie had thought him the most charming man in the whole world. Of course, that was back when she was twelve and he was a layabout who lived on his father's money. Since then, she'd learned to speak and now divided her time between her horses at the ranch and her obligations in Cheyenne. And he... well, every other year he visited Cheyenne, and she got to know him better. He wasn't a layabout; he just had different goals than the rest of his family. She watched him talk about medical school and the work he was now doing at the clinic for the workers of New York, and found more and more things to admire about him.

And then his mother had written to Sebastian to offer to sponsor "his little deaf friend" for a season in New York. It was an amazing opportunity, and one that Annie would be foolish to pass up. At least, that's what Serena had said, and Wendy had agreed. Annie's sister had spent a few years among the "high society folks"—as she called them—in St. Louis, and thought that it was important for a young woman to see something of the world. In fact, she'd looked a

little disappointed that she couldn't go too, just for the adventure; but she was due to have her baby within the month, and Nate rarely let her out of his sight. Their oldest sister Molly was the one who objected so fervently, but since she also objected to Annie traveling alone, the younger woman assumed it was just Molly being overprotective. But now, having to crane her neck to see the tops of some of the buildings here, Annie was beginning to think that maybe her sister *had* been right when she'd warned her how different things were in the East.

Reggie climbed in beside her, gave a little smile, and the carriage started with the slightest of lurches. It had been a bit of a relief to see that the "automobile" craze Nate was always talking about wasn't quite as widespread as she'd feared, and that Reggie's carriage was pulled by a pair of beautiful matching gray mares. She'd almost stopped to pet them, but then remembered that here, in the city, she couldn't stop to make friends with random horses. She had to be proper. Well... *more* proper, at least.

She wanted to know all about the sights they were passing—she'd read about the city on the train—but instead turned towards Reggie expectantly. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again. Oh dear. Did he not remember that she could understand his words by watching his lips? It wasn't easy—had taken years of practice—and Annie had to concentrate, but it was the best way to communicate with people who could hear. They often slurred their words together, and she missed many of them, but was able to get the general gist of their statement. It wasn't easy, but it worked.

As if knowing that speaking wasn't her first choice of communication, Reggie reached into the pocket formed between the cushion and the wall, and pulled out a notebook. He'd brought a notebook. He'd thought to bring a notebook?

Reggie Carderock was turning out to be a delightful surprise.

**We're going to my parents' house now.**

His scrawl was as bold and masculine as he was, and made Annie smile to see it. She would always be more comfortable communicating in writing, or sign, and Reggie thinking to bring a notebook made her all warm inside. Of course she had her own notebook—she would never have dreamed of traveling across the country alone without having a ready means of communication—but she loved that he'd thought of it as well. She took the pencil when he offered it.

*I look forward to it.* And then hesitantly: *Will you be there too?*

**Yes. I've never bothered to get my own house, since I'm away so often.**

Then he went back and wrote in “at the clinic” after “away” and Annie’s heart squeezed a little. She loved that he was always so intent on the truth, so careful to make sure that he communicated everything properly. It was so different from the way she’d learned to “talk,” when Wendy helped her create a series of signs for various things. The “language” she’d grown up with was far from accurate or specific; she and her family could communicate entire sentences with only a few words. It wasn’t until Wendy taught her to read and write that she learned how to make a complete sentence or to understand the complexities of grammar. But even now, when she used her notebook to communicate, she usually used a sort of short-hand.

Here in New York City, she’d have to remember to be careful what she wrote, what she said. Reggie’s family were the sort who would care.

The trip to his parents’ home took longer than expected. Cheyenne was big, but a person could walk across it still. New York City was... well, it was tremendous, and crowded with people and street cars such that the horses had to pick their way carefully through the slushy streets. Annie spent the time with her nose practically pressed to the window, eager to see the sights and buildings she’d only read about. Reggie had the driver take them up Park Avenue and across Fifty-First, so she could see St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and then up—briefly—through Central Park. Then his heavy scrawl identified the sights of the Theater District and Longacre Square, and even though he mentioned that the area was improving, he refused to let her get out and gawk. Her cheeks grew warm from his teasing, but she didn’t mind.

It was almost evening when they finally arrived at the luxurious Carderock home on Fifth Avenue, and Annie tried to pretend that she wasn’t completely flabbergasted by such elegance. The front entranceway was bedecked in garlands and heavy red bows, and each of the large windows—there were ten that faced the street!—had a beautiful matching wreath hanging from the center. She couldn’t help but compare them to the simpler decorations she and her sisters and brothers-in-law had labored over in their cozy house in the Cheyenne wilderness.

Inside the foyer, Reggie waved off the stately older man in the servant’s black, and took her coat and hat himself. It was gentlemanly, and Annie smiled softly at him in appreciation. She could swear that she saw his cheeks color slightly, but it could’ve been the light from the electric lamps making odd shadows.

There was mistletoe hanging from the giant crystal chandelier above their heads, but she pretended not to notice.

When he offered her his arm, she placed her fingers on the

wool of his jacket, and he led her into a parlor. The elegant lady who'd been waiting there rose to greet them, and Annie almost gaped at her dress. Mrs. Carderock was still a beautiful woman, and Annie remembered her being the paragon of sophisticated grace... but that was at her son's wedding, almost a decade ago. Here she stood, in her own home, dressed in a gown elaborate enough to attend a ball. Annie was suddenly very glad that she'd changed into her nicest pale blue dress this morning, rather than the travel-stained dark gown she'd worn for most of the trip, or the skirts and shirtwaists she normally wore in Cheyenne.

Heaven knew what Mrs. Carderock would think if she knew that even *those* skirts were fancier than the jeans she preferred when she was on the ranch, training her colts.

"Welcome to fabulous New York City, my dear!" Mrs. Carderock continued, as she came forward to embrace Annie, but the rest of her greeting was lost. In fact, Annie wasn't entirely sure about her first words, either, but judging from the kiss the older woman dropped on her cheek, she was certain it was a welcome. Reggie's mother was apparently one of those with the aggravating habit of blending her words together. It was probably not even noticed by her peers, but Annie could already tell that she was going to get a headache, trying to follow her hostess's words.

It was so much easier with someone like Reggie, who knew enough—either from his visits or his medical training—to speak clearly while looking directly at her. She liked the way he didn't use contractions when he spoke, which made his meaning even easier to understand. His mother, on the other hand...

Mrs. Carderock stepped back and beamed at her, so Annie took a chance and dropped a small curtsy. "Thank you very much for having me, ma'am."

She was looking directly at her hostess—Annie always had to stare at peoples' faces, in order to make sure she didn't miss their words—and thus saw the wince Mrs. Carderock couldn't quite hide at her words.

Annie stifled a sigh. She'd never heard herself speak, of course, but her family had explained that her voice sounded *wrong*. Most of the people she interacted with in her life had gotten used to it, but it was always a surprise, meeting new people. Annie wanted to scowl at them—at Mrs. Carderock—and ask them how well *they'd* be able to speak if they couldn't hear. She'd worked so hard to be able to speak at all, and people were bothered by something as silly as the sound of her voice?

Sebastian had explained to her years ago that the only way she'd be able to be accepted by society was to give up her signs—"All



that waving about makes you look like a savage”—and learn to speak. She’d had to dismiss the language of signs Wendy had created for her when they’d both been young, giving up that part of herself and her past. Instead, she’d spent years of lessons studying the proper use of lips and tongues and breath in speech, mimicking them as well as she could. So she still couldn’t pronounce certain words—who cared?

Apparently Mrs. Carderock did, judging from her forced smile. “You must be exhausted from the journey, Annie. Why don’t you run along upstairs to change for dinner?”

Annie glanced helplessly at Reggie, who tilted his head just slightly towards the door to the foyer and the stairs. She appreciated his attempts at translation, but was more worried about what she was fairly certain his mother had just said: Change for dinner? But this was the nicest gown she’d brought with her.

As Reggie escorted her towards the main staircase, Annie couldn’t help but look back at the crystalline Christmas decorations and the perfection the house represented. She was beginning to suspect that she wasn’t going to fit in here, just as Molly tried to hint. Her oldest sister was usually right, but Annie hadn’t wanted to believe it. She’d wanted to see New York, to experience the beauty of a high-society Christmas.

But was it where she belonged?



Don’t worry! You can follow Annie and Reggie’s Christmas journey to figure out their future in [\*Where They Belong: A Sweet Cheyenne Christmas Story\*](#)

And if you’d like to start at the beginning, to find out how the Barker brothers met the Murray sisters in the first place, check out [\*A Cheyenne Christmas\*](#). Reviewers are calling it “heart-warming” and “realistically sweet,” just like the rest of the series!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Lee is what George R.R. Martin once described as a "gardener author"; she delights in “planting” lovable characters in interesting situations, and allowing them to “grow” their own stories. Often they draw the story along to completely unexpected--and wonderful!--places. She considers a story a success if she can re-read it and sigh dreamily... and she wishes the same for you.

A love of historical romance prompted Caroline to pursue her degrees in social history; her Master's Degree is in Comparative World History, which is the study of themes across history (for instance, 'domestication of animals throughout the world,' or 'childhood through history'). Her theme? You guessed it: Marriage throughout world history. Her favorite focus was periods of history that brought two disparate peoples together to marry, like marriage in the Levant during the Kingdom of Jerusalem, or marriage between convicts in colonial New South Wales. She hopes that she's able to bring this love of history-- and this history of love-- to her novels.

Each one of the books in her Sweet Cheyenne Quartet has reached the Best-Sellers list on Amazon, and all are available in e-book and paperback formats.

Caroline is living her own little Happily Ever After with her husband and sons in North Carolina.

You can find her at [www.CarolineLeeRomance.com](http://www.CarolineLeeRomance.com).

*Other works by Caroline Lee*

### **The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet**

*A Cheyenne Christmas*

*A Cheyenne Celebration*

*A Cheyenne Thanksgiving*

*A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming*

*Where They Belong: A Sweet Cheyenne Christmas Story*

*The Mothers of Sweet Cheyenne: A short story collection*

### **Everland Ever After**



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